

Veritas Rerum vs Mens Philosophorum?

**THE DEBATE ON THE IMMORTALITY
OF THE SOUL IN ITALY AFTER
THE PUBLICATION OF THE BULL
APOSTOLICI REGIMINIS (1513):
CAJETAN, POMPONAZZI, SPINA,
PRIERIAS, JAVELLI**

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ABSTRACT

The paper shows a comparison between five Renaissance authors – four Thomists (Cajetan, Spina, Prierias, Javelli) and a secular Aristotelian (Pomponazzi) – on the issue of the interpretation of the Aristotelian psychology, that is, whether it is in favor or against the possibility of providing a demonstration of the immortality of the human soul, in the light of the ecclesiastical sanction on this topic. With the papal bull *Apostolici regiminis* (19 December 1513), the Church had dogmatized the Aristotelian-Thomistic formulation of the ontological status of the human soul (the soul is essentially the form of the body, immortal, infused by God, multiplied for the number of men), thus endorsing the immortalistic reading of Aristotle's statements handed down by Thomas Aquinas. The present investigation seeks to develop the arguments of each of the authors and to elaborate their compatibility and distinctness. On the one hand, there are Cajetan and Pomponazzi, supporters of a mortalistic exegesis of Aristotle and of the inability to provide proof of the immortality of the soul on the basis of the Peripatetic philosophy. On the other hand, there are Spina, Prierias and Javelli, supporters of the classical Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle, albeit with some significant differences. Spina exposes the difficulty to save the agreement between reason and Revelation without the authority of the Stagirite; Prierias especially emphasizes the need to preserve the truth of faith regardless of what is considered to be the opinion of the great philosophers of the past; Javelli expressly acknowledges the limitations of the Aristotelian philosophy when there is no supervision of the Christian exegete.*

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— I would like to begin by giving a brief explanation of the title of this paper: *veritas rerum vs mens philosophorum*. The opposition examined here is that between the dogma of the immortality of the human soul – as it is sanctioned by the papal bull *Apostolici regiminis* of 19 December 1513 – and the philosophical interpretations of this theme. The choice of this title comes from reading a passage by Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, or Prierias, a Dominican theologian, Master of the Sacred Palace from 1515.¹ The book in question, published in 1521, is entitled *De strigimagarum daemonumque mirandis* and is basically an inquisitorial text, on the model of the *Malleus maleficarum*, concerning the procedures to be followed in cases

of suspected witchcraft. In a short chapter, however, the author engages the question of the immortality of the soul, and at one point he makes a consideration on a prevailing trend in his own time:

“Sed haec est temporis nostri superba malignitas, qua multi putant se inter praeclaros philosophos non censendos, nisi contra veram fidem & christianam pietatem aliquid astruanti non quasi verum, sed quasi de mente Averrois, aut certe Aristotelis, vel eiusmodi, adeo ut pene nihil in gymnasijis de rerum veritate disputetur, sed de mente philosophorum, maxime Averrois...”²

Many philosophers, Prierias says, seem to have the bad habit of wanting to be famous not for dealing with the truth of things (“de rerum veritate”) – that is, precisely, defending the

1 For some bibliographical indication on Prierias, see below n. 38. p. 66, pozn. 2.

2 Prierias 1575, p. 30.

immortality of the human soul – but for dealing with the interpretations of other philosophers, like Averroes and Aristotle (“de mente Averrois, aut certe Aristotelis”), especially if these interpretations appear to be contrary to the Catholic faith.

Yet, first things first. The present historical reconstruction begins a few years before the publication of Prierias’s book and the enactment of the *Apostolici regiminis*. Its main protagonists are three Thomistic philosophers and theologians – Tommaso de Vio called “Cajetan” (lat. “Caetanum”), Bartolomeo Spina and Crisostomo Javelli – who were involved in different ways in the controversy sparked by the publication of Pietro Pomponazzi’s *De immortalitate animae* (1516).¹

As is known, in this treatise Pomponazzi focused mainly on the analysis of three aspects: the correct interpretation of Aristotle’s statements relating to the immortality of the human soul; the possibility of giving a demonstration of this topic that remains within the natural limits and that excludes the revealed data; the cogency of the Thomistic thesis, according to which the human soul is both the form of the body and the intellectual substance which is able to survive the corruption of the body.²

Certainly it was a matter of debate on exegetical grounds, but not only that. Pomponazzi’s treatise is not a commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima*, but a text in which placed against one another is the Christian (and Thomistic) doctrine of the immortality of the soul and what is lawful to infer about the human soul on the basis of Aristotelian claims, the reason and the experience (that is, without Revelation). And from this latter point of view, Pomponazzi undertook to demonstrate the legitimacy of the mortalistic thesis – actually, the greater legitimacy of the mortalistic thesis over the immortalistic – without questioning, however, his personal adhesion to the truth of faith. According to the author’s statements, the purpose of the work was not to give support to one opinion rather than another, but to consider, as an outside observer, both opinions, in order to conclude – in addition to the incompatibility of Thomas Aquinas’s position with Aristotle’s – the impossibility of solving the issue, at least in strictly philosophical terms: if one ignores the faith, both arguments can be adduced, in support of the immortality of the soul and in support of the mortality of the soul. Actually, there are more arguments that can be adduced in support of the mortalistic thesis, for Only Revelation and Holy Scripture can give us the assurance of the immortality of our soul – but in so saying Pomponazzi delineated the risk of an irreconcilable conflict between the truths of faith and the results of the rational inquiry.³

1 On the Pomponazzi affair, see Gilson 1961, pp. 163-279; and idem, Gilson 1963, pp. 31-61; Di Napoli 1963, pp. 277-338; Pine 1986.

2 See V. Perrone Compagni, Introduction to her Italian translation of Pomponazzi’s book, Pomponazzi 1999, pp. V-Cl.

3 See in particular chapter XV of Pomponazzi’s *De immortalitate*. For a good and recent critical edition of

Many people, after the publication of the book, took against Pomponazzi. To some of these opponents he answered in two works: the *Apologia* and the *Defensorium*, published in Bologna in 1518 and 1519, respectively. One of the most aggressive among those who came into dispute with him (but whom Pomponazzi never answered) was the Dominican friar Bartholomeo Spina, author of three treatises published jointly in Venice in 1519, in a collection entitled *Opuscula*¹. Aside from the violence of the tone, what distinguishes this intervention from the others is the stated purpose of a twofold attack. Spina, actually, criticizes not only Pomponazzi, but also one of his brothers who, in Spina's view, had been the main inspiration for Pomponazzi. The brother was Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, who was elected general master of the Order of Preachers in 1508 and cardinal of San Sisto in 1517. Now known for the delicate task entrusted to him by Pope Leo X to induce Luther to retract his thesis, and also as the most eminent among the interpreters of St. Thomas – Cajetan was actually the author of a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, published in Rome in 1510, in which he had come to a surprising conclusion, in stark contrast to what had been taught by Thomas Aquinas: from a closer reading of the text of *De anima* it is manifest that Aristotle held that the

human soul was mortal.² For Spina it was a big exegetical mistake, which had the worrying collateral effect of paving the way to the denial of the immortality by Pomponazzi.³ Hence the requirement of a double refutation to remove the risk of other “infections”: therefore, the first of the three contributions by Spina, entitled *Propugnaculum Aristotelis de immortalitate anime contra Thomam Caietanum*, is dedicated to amending the philological conclusions of Cajetan; the second and the third treatises, entitled respectively *Tutela veritatis de immortalitate animae contra Petrum Pomponatium mantuanum cognominatum Perettum* and *Flagellum in tres libros Apologiae Peretti* are respectively dedicated to a rebuttal of the “scandalous” arguments of Pomponazzi's *De immortalitate animae* and *Apologia*.

For Spina, therefore, Pomponazzi was stirred up from the mortalistic interpretation of the Aristotelian psychology provided by Cajetan. Wanting briefly to give an account of the affinity between Cajetan's work and Pomponazzi's, we can say that, by comparing Cajetan's commentary and Pomponazzi's *De immortalitate animae*, we find a correlation on three aspects in particular, concerning the interpretation of Aristotle's statements in *De anima*. These three aspects – which both Cajetan and Pomponazzi

the treatise, see Pomponazzi 2014, pp. 922-1104.

¹ For a biography of Spina, see Amann 1939-41, pp. 2479-2480; Duni 2010, pp. 1471-1472.

² For the life and the scientific activity of Cajetan, see Cossio 1902; Congar 1934-35, pp. 3-49; Stöve 1991, pp. 567-578; Arnold 2010, pp. 471-473; on the main topics of his studies, see Giacon 2001.

³ See in particular Spina 1519.

focus on, in opposition to the classic Thomistic interpretation of the Aristotelian psychology – are: whether it is possible or not to conclude that thinking is a soul’s proper operation and not common to the soul and the body; the ontological status of the possible intellect; the ontological status of the agent intellect.

The first argument is based on some conditions laid down by Aristotle himself in book I of *De anima*¹. Here, raising the question of the affections of the soul – if they are all affections of the complex of body and soul, or if there is any one among them peculiar to the soul itself – Aristotle says that considering the majority of them, there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body, as in the case of anger, courage, appetite and sensation generally. Only thinking seems the most probable exception, that is, it seems to be a soul’s proper operation. Nevertheless, if thinking proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it also requires a body as a condition of its existence. What does it mean to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination? It means that thinking, to be considered independent of the body, must prove not to be a faculty which uses the senses, such as imagination, and need not have an object of the sensitive knowledge, that is, an object produced by a sensitive faculty as the imagination. Thus, concludes Aristotle, if thinking is to be

considered a soul’s proper operation, we can say that the soul is able to have a separate existence; but if thinking is not to be considered a soul’s proper operation, we should say that the soul is not separable from the body. Now, both Cajetan and Pomponazzi track down the solution to this problem in the text of the *De anima*. In book III, Aristotle says openly that our soul never thinks without the sensitive images from which it abstracts its concepts.² For this reason, both Cajetan and Pomponazzi conclude that thinking is not peculiar to the soul, but is an operation of the complex of body and soul, because, although it does not use sense organs to happen, it needs to employ a product of the senses – the images, to be precise. The soul, then, according to this first argument, is not separable and cannot survive the corruption of the body.³ Conversely, the classic Thomistic exposition adopts a weak meaning of the expression “soul’s proper operation”. For St. Thomas it is true that the soul never thinks without images, but what matters most is that it does not avail itself of the sense organs to think. Thinking is not an organic operation, so it is peculiar to the soul. This is enough, according to St. Thomas, to say that the soul is separable from the body and to assume that the soul, in a state of separation, can just as well exist without the body, in the same way

1 See Aristotle, *De anima*, A1 403a3-13.

2 See Aristotle, *De anima*, Γ7 431a18-19, Γ8 432a9.

3 For Cajetan, see Caietanus 1938, §31, 33; for Pomponazzi, see chapter IV of *De immortalitate*, in Pomponazzi 2014, p. 936.

that it will have a mode of knowledge that does not employ sensitive images.¹

The second and third arguments of Cajetan's and Pomponazzi's interpretations take into consideration the ontological status of the possible intellect and of the agent intellect, which are for Aristotle the two main principles of the intellection: the passive principle and the active principle respectively. In the Aristotelian psychology, the task of the agent intellect is to abstract the intelligible species from the sensitive images, removing the material and individual conditions which characterize the sensitive images. In short: the agent intellect abstracts the universal from the particular. Once abstracted from the sensible images, the intelligible species can thus act upon the possible intellect, by passing it from the potency to the act, and in this way the possible intellect is made capable of thinking. The possible intellect is therefore the intellect with which we think properly. Aristotle says that this intellect is not blended with the body and does not use any organ, unlike the sensitive faculties which are organic faculties.² But is this sufficient to say that the possible intellect is separable from the body? For Cajetan and Pomponazzi it is not. It is true that it is not mixed with the material and that it is not organic, but it is also true, as we have seen, that to perform its operation – thinking – it always needs to use an object of the bodily

knowledge: the images. Cajetan's and Pomponazzi's conclusions, then, are that the possible intellect is separable from the body only in theory – that is, as intellect, it is distinguished from the simple organic faculties – but it is not separable from the body in practice, because it is always the intellect of a human body and it always needs this body to think.³ Conversely, Cajetan and Pomponazzi believe that we can speak of a real separation for the agent intellect, but only because they do not recognize it as a faculty of the human soul, but as a separate substance, which is the motor of the intellection.⁴ Even in the definition of the status of the agent intellect and the possible intellect, then, Cajetan and Pomponazzi turn away from Thomas Aquinas, because for St. Thomas the possible intellect and the agent intellect are both two intrinsic faculties of our soul, and both are effectively separate from the body.⁵

On the other hand, while being compatible in the interpretation of Aristotle's words in *De anima*, Cajetan's commentary and Pomponazzi's treatise differ for the purposes of the two authors. Pomponazzi, with a mortalistic interpretation of Aristotle's words,

1 See Aquino 1984, pp. 9-10, ll. 46-81.

2 See Aristotle, *De anima*, Γ4 429a24-27.

3 For Cajetan, see Caietanus 1965, §114, 69; for Pomponazzi, see chapter IX of the *De immortalitate*, in Pomponazzi 2014, p. 1004.

4 For Cajetan's conclusion, see Caietanus 1749, §§93-97, 61-63; for Pomponazzi's, see chapter X of the *De immortalitate*, in Pomponazzi 2014, pp. 1024-26. Their interpretations are based on Aristotle, *De anima*, Γ5 430a23-25.

5 See Aquino 1984, pp. 220-221, ll. 89-166.

wants to show that, when human reason does not rely on faith and proceeds only through its own means, this not only fails to prove the immortality of the soul, but even contributes more evidence in support of the mortality. Human reason, in other words, comes into conflict with faith. This is because, according to Pomponazzi, the immortality of the soul is not a philosophical problem, but an article of faith. Therefore, those who deal with this issue should not use the tools of philosophy but those of theology. Cajetan, instead, does not want to show that the question of the immortality is an article of faith, but wants to deal with a direct reading of *De anima* – that is, a reading not mediated by the interpretation given to it by Thomas Aquinas. For this reason, Cajetan obtains a new Latin translation of the Greek text and engages himself in a serious philological analysis.¹ As he explains in the prefatory dedication to the cardinal Oliviero Carafa, his aim is to follow as closely as possible to Aristotle's statements, although this choice forces him to refute the exegesis produced by other famous commentators – that is, precisely, that of St. Thomas.² In other words, Cajetan, as exegete, wants to break free from Thomas. At the end of his analysis, Cajetan presents a new explanation to the reader:

“...scito quod non est intentionis meae dicere aut sustinere velle

intellectum possibilem esse generabilem et corruptibilem secundum philosophiae principia: quoniam haec positio est falsissima. Quoniam ex principiis philosophiae utpote veris non deducitur recte nisi verum. Hoc autem constat ex fide esse falsum. Igitur non potest ex principiis philosophiae sequi. Unde neque ut verum, neque ut consonum, neque ut probabile philosophiae haec scripserim; sed tantum ut exponens opinionem istius Graeci [sc. Aristotelis], quam conabor ostendere esse falsam secundum philosophiae principia.”³

In other words, although Aristotle considered that the human soul was perishable, we cannot accept this opinion as philosophically correct, because it is quite false. Cajetan thus distinguishes his exegetical position from his philosophical position: as an exegete of Aristotle, he is forced to say that the human soul is corruptible, while, as philosopher, he continues to believe that the soul is immortal. The principles of philosophy – asserts Cajetan – as true, can only arrive at true conclusions, and we really know for certain by faith that the soul is immortal. So, at this point, Cajetan must renounce Aristotle's authority and resort to Thomistic evidence – actually, weak evidence – which concerns the metaphysical placement of the human soul as “rationabile medium”: the human soul is a medium element that connects the totally material forms with the totally immaterial forms, and, as such, it shares some characteristics with the material forms and some

1 See the important essay of Laurent 1938, in the critical edition of Cajetan's commentary on 1st book of *De anima*, *Scripta Philosophica*, VII-LII.

2 See Cajetan 1749, p. 13.

3 Cajetan 1749, §§102, 65.

characteristics with the immaterial forms. As the material forms, the soul is the form of a human body and is located in matter; as the immaterial forms, the soul is separable from matter and is therefore able to survive the corruption of the body.¹

Although in the end he tried to reconcile his view with St. Thomas', Cajetan showed with his commentary that it was conceptually possible, from inside the same Thomistic school, to provide an interpretation of Aristotle's words antithetical to that of St. Thomas, and in this way, according to Spina, he authorized the anti-Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle's words provided by a secular philosopher like Pomponazzi.

Cajetan's commentary, however, is not the only work in which it is possible to recognize the well-spring of this controversy, because of its affinity with Pomponazzi's treatise, but also a central text in the chronology of Cajetan's works. Actually, if we try to recreate his position on the question of the immortality of the soul in the course of his scientific activity, we can see that he passed from a phase – prior to his commentary – in which he argues without reservation that the truth of faith is supported by human reason, to a phase – subsequent to his commentary – in which he instead argues that the truth of faith is only guaranteed by faith, but cannot be proved by human reason.

As an illustration of the first phase,

we can mention the oration entitled *De immortalitate animorum*, delivered in the presence of Pope Julius II and of the cardinals during the first Sunday of Advent in 1503:

“Verum maximam de immortalitate animorum difficultatem, et eam penitus explicatam (si tamen ita dici sine arrogantia licet) maiestati tuae offerendam attuli. [...] Quas ob res si animi nostri (de quo agimus) facultas certi aliquid comperire potest, et veritatis quippiam de seipso perspicere, si fortissimis argumentis fides ulla adhibenda est, si ratione investigata et ad sensum usque explorationem deducta humanae sententiae quietem tribuunt, ineruditi, indocilis, tardi, ebeti, stupidique est immortalitatem animorum in problema revocare neutrum.”²

Cajetan begins by claiming to be fully able to give a complete demonstration of the immortality of our soul, in spite of the difficulty of the subject, and, after showing a range of evidence obtained both from Aristotle and St. Thomas, concludes that it is foolish to consider the question of immortality as a neutral problem (referring here to the traditional position of Scotus) – namely as an unsolvable problem by human reason. On the contrary, he claims to have demonstrated this truth without showing any theological argument. In this case, Cajetan basically employs three pieces of evidences: the first is that based on the possibility of considering thinking as the soul's proper operation (but here

1 Caietanus 1749, §§122, 74. On the weakness of this evidence, see Gilson 1961, pp. 180-183; Di Napoli 1963, p. 219.

2 Caietanus 1580, fol. 98r, col. I - 98v, col. II.

Cajetan employs a weak meaning, that is Thomistic, of the expression “soul’s proper operation”: thinking is the soul’s proper operation because it is not organic); the second piece of evidence is based on the desire of the rational soul to live forever; the third piece of evidence is the same metaphysic evidence that he will use in his commentary on *De anima*: the human soul, as a linking element between the material and immaterial forms, shares characteristics of both of them.

Cajetan’s second phase concerns some hints that he makes to the problem of the immortality of the soul in his commentary to the Holy Scriptures. We can mention an exemplar passage from his commentary on the *Letter of St. Paul to the Romans* (completed in 1528), in which Cajetan considers the difficulty of rationally reconciling predestination with free will:

“Et cum obiicies, coniuge haec verba [sc. praedestinationem et liberum arbitrium] simul, respondeo me scire quod verum vero non est contrarium, sed nescire haec iungere, sicut nescio mysterium Trinitatis, sicut nescio animam immortalem, sicut nescio Verbum caro factum est, & similia, quae tamen omnia credo. Et sicut credo reliqua fidei mysteria, ita credo & haec mysteria predestinationis et reprobationis. Meum est tenere quod mihi certum est (scilicet uti libero arbitrio & reliquis bonis mihi a Deo concessis omni studio ad consequendam vitam aeternam) & expectare ut videam, in

patria mysterium divinae electionis mihi modo ignotum, sicut & reliqua fidei mysteria. Haec ignorantia quietat intellectum meum.”¹

The difficulty, Cajetan says, forces us to classify this problem as a mystery of faith, like the Incarnation, the Trinity and, surprisingly, the immortality of the soul. In other words, he recognizes his own ignorance in the face of similar issues – a kind of ignorance that quiets the mind and its claims. At a distance of about twenty years from his commentary on *De anima*, the question of the immortality of the soul is no longer a philosophical problem for Cajetan, but a mystery of faith.

Among the hypotheses that can be made concerning Cajetan’s change of mind, one of the most compelling seems to be that which focuses on the commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima* as the turning point. It is entirely plausible that precisely the conclusions that he had obtained in his commentary produced in him a kind of inner conflict that later led him to a frank agnostic position. But in truth, already before this point, we can almost see an early repercussion of this crisis in a singular episode in which he was involved only a few years after the publication of the commentary. The episode concerns his participation as general master of his Order in the eighth session of the V Lateran Council, during which he was a member of the Committee for the drafting of the papal bull *Apostolici regiminis* and took part in its vote of approval.²

1 [Cajetanus 1639, fol. 58, col. II.](#)

2 [For the list of the members of the](#)

The decree firstly established the dogma of the immortality of the soul¹: the human soul not only truly exists of itself and essentially as the form of the human body, but it is also immortal; and further, it is multiplied for the number of the bodies into which it is infused individually. In addition, “cum verum vero minime contradicat” – that is, since (philosophical) truth cannot contradict (theological) truth – the bull condemned as heretical – precisely, as the work of the Devil, the sower of weed (“zizaniae seminator”) in the Lord’s field – all those philosophical doctrines asserting that the rational soul is mortal or that it is only one soul for all mankind, and those who doubted this topic.² These deviations being thus censored, the bull secondly imposed on the philosophy professors the teaching strategy to prevent the spread of these errors: it enjoined on each and every philosopher who taught publicly in the universities or elsewhere that when they explained or addressed to their audience the principles or conclusions of the philosophers, where these were known to deviate from the truth of the faith – as in the assertion of the soul’s mortality or of there being only one soul –, they are obliged to devote their every effort to clarify for their listeners the truth of the Christian religion (“veritatem religionis christianae omni conatu manifestam

facere”), to teach it convincingly, so far as this is possible (“persuadendo pro posse docere”), and to apply themselves to the full extent of their energies to refuting and disposing of the philosophers’ opposing arguments, since all the solutions are available (“ac omni studio huiusmodi philosophorum argumenta, cum omnia solubilia existant, pro viribus excludere atque resolvere”).³

As we can read from the acts of the Council, Cajetan was the only one, along with the Bishop of Bergamo, to disapprove of the second part of the bull: for him, the philosophy professors should not be forced to prove the truths of faith.⁴ It is a strange position, if we think that he himself, a few years before, despite having given a mortalistic interpretation of the *De anima*, was quick to say that this thesis was philosophically untenable and that Aristotle was wrong. We can then assume that, because of the loss of Aristotle’s support, Cajetan then began to doubt the possibility of demonstrating philosophically the immortality of the soul.⁵

But let’s return to Spina. It is noteworthy that he accused his brother, especially because, if we look at his biography, we see that his relations with

Committee for the drafting of the bull, see Mansi 1902, col. 797; for the list of the participants in its vote of approval, see *idem*, colls. 827-831.

1 The full text of the bull is in Mansi 1902, cols. 842-843.

2 Mansi 1902, vol. 32, col. 842.

3 Mansi 1902, vol. 32, col. 842. On the bull *Apostolici regiminis*, see Monfasani 1993, pp. 247-276; Constant 2002, pp. 353-378; Bianchi 2008, in particular chapter IV, pp. 117-156; Cappiello, Lamanna 2014, pp. 325-352.

4 See Mansi 1902, vol. 32, col. 843.

5 See Verga 1935, pp. 41-46; Gilson 1955, p. 131, 134; Offelli 1955, p. 13; Di Napoli 1963, p. 224.

Cajetan were more than good up to that point. Only a short time before, actually, as the curator of Cajetan's critical edition of the *Pars Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*, Spina voluntarily drew up a preface in which he exalted to such a degree Cajetan's qualities to see in him the living image of Thomas Aquinas ("quasi vivens Aquinatis imago").¹ Spina himself provides us with the reason for this sudden change:² he says that he wanted to intervene in the defense of the truth from the moment of the publication of Cajetan's commentary, but that he hesitated in awe of Cajetan – who was one of his superiors, while at that time Spina was just a simple friar. This hesitation, however, lasted until Spina noticed that Cajetan's position was becoming dangerously contagious, which was realized with the publication of Pomponazzi's treatise.

It is also necessary to point out that Spina's attack not only reveals a disagreement within the Thomistic school on the topic of the immortality of the soul, but also allows us to suppose that he did not even approve of Cajetan's vote against the second part of the papal bull. There is in Spina's works more than one reference that permits us to reconstruct what his opinion was about the recent provisions of the Church. Even with a cursory reading, we can see that in his treatises Spina adopts a register very close to that of the *Apostolici regiminis*, a register that we can define

at one time as clinical and apocalyptic: the spread of the errors concerning the truth of the soul is actually described by Spina as an infection, and this infection is interpreted as the work of the Devil. Pomponazzi, for example, is explicitly accused of being an emissary of the Devil, of infesting the world with pestiferous weeds and of wanting to sow poison in the hearts of his students.³ But going deeper into the reading of the *Opuscula*, it's possible to say that Spina intercepts the strongest instance of the *Apostolici regiminis*, that is, the important apologetic role attributed to philosophy: philosophy must be at the service of faith.

In the preface of the *Propugnaculum* – the treatise written against Cajetan – Spina says that the question of immortality cannot be evaluated as an object of special investigation of theology, but should be seen in all its pure philosophical dimensions:

"Et quum salus omnis atque felicitas nostra ex ea oriatur atque in ipsa finiatur, per quam omnis perfectio obtinetur, et sine qua nullam vel sperare possumus, id nobis eius inquisitionem ac scrutandi inevitabilem necessitatem imponit. Hinc factum est ut omnes qui philosophie (ut Theologos nunc obmictam) se dederunt, circa cognitionem anime non minimam operam consumpserint [...]. Solatium etenim non mediocre fidelibus affert tam celebrati philosophi [sc. Aristotelis] testimonium in re tanta, infirmis inter christianos extreme

1 For Spina's preface see Laurent 1934-35, pp. 448-454 (cit. 449).

2 See Spina 1519, Prefatory Letter to *Propugnaculum*, in *Opuscula*.

3 See Spina 1519, *Flagellum in tres libros Apologiae Peretti*, in *Opuscula*, fol. K4r.

ruine clauditur praecipitium, infidelibus autem ex veritate hac facilis ad fidem praeparatur via.”¹

In knowledge of the soul, Spina says, our happiness and our salvation are at stake, and this is why all those who dedicated themselves to philosophy grappled with this issue. In addition, against Cajetan’s claim to provide only a “harmless” interpretation of Aristotle’s words without questioning the truth of faith, Spina insists that Aristotle’s testimony on this issue is not a worthless thing, because knowing that Aristotle supported the immortality of the soul means giving stability to those Christians who are wavering in their faith and paving the way towards faith for the non-believers. For this reason, although Spina intervened against Cajetan only after the publication of Pomponazzi’s treatise, he was busy from the moment of the publication of Cajetan’s commentary providing his students with a correct (immortalistic) interpretation of Aristotle, which he had done with all his energies – “pro viribus” – , precisely as prescribed by the papal bull.²

On the basis of these observations, we can conclude that Spina had probably not even approved of Cajetan’s vote in the Council, which aimed at a distinction between philosophy and theology. Spina therefore approved neither of Cajetan’s attitude towards the psychology of Thomas Aquinas, nor of the idea that we should safeguard

the mutual autonomy of philosophy and theology, especially for issues like that of the immortality of the soul in which these two disciplines are both necessarily involved: fixed by the certainty of faith, a Christian philosopher can only provide reasons in support of this truth.

This latter is a point on which Spina also challenges Pomponazzi, judging it to be unacceptable that a Christian philosopher should put to the test the truth of the soul, and reaffirming the importance of producing rational evidence to corroborate faith and faithful people. Spina is insistent on these topics both in the *Tutela* – the treatise written against the *De immortalitate animae* – and especially in the *Flagellum* – the treatise directed against Pomponazzi’s *Apologia*, the work in which Pomponazzi defended himself against the accusations of heresy.³ To ensure his innocence, in this book Pomponazzi says that both Pietro Bembo, the secretary of Pope Leo X, and the Master of the Sacred Palace, Prierias, had nothing to say on his treatise;⁴ and indeed, concerning Prierias, Pomponazzi adds that, according to some rumors, the Master of the Sacred Palace had rather intended to write a treatise against one of his brothers, who had given a mortalistic interpretation of Aristotle’s words.⁵

1 Spina 1519, Prefatory Letter to *Propugnaculum*, in *Opuscula*.

2 See Spina 1519, Prefatory Letter to *Propugnaculum*, in *Opuscula*.

3 See, for example Spina 1519, in *Opuscula*, fol. H7v-H8r; and *Flagellum*, in *Opuscula*, fol. K4r-K4v.

4 Pomponazzi, book III, chapter II of the *Apologia*, in Pomponazzi 2014, p. 1494.

5 Pomponazzi, book II, chapter II of the *Apologia*, in Pomponazzi 2014, p. 1394.

Pomponazzi clearly alludes to Cajetan. Actually, Prierias despised Pomponazzi's treatise: Prierias himself tells us this in the *De strigimagarum*, but also Spina – who was one of the favorite disciples of Prierias – tells us this in the *Flagellum*.¹ Nevertheless, Pomponazzi was right. Prierias despised Cajetan's commentary too, and actually, in the *De strigimagarum*, Prierias heavily criticizes Cajetan, but without ever naming him.² Prierias had exactly the same idea as Spina. Pomponazzi's allusion to Cajetan was then a provocation, a way to say that the Master of the Sacred Palace was in no position to attack him, because a well-known Thomist like Cajetan, at least from the exegetical point of view, had endorsed the mortalistic thesis too.³ And perhaps it's thanks to Cajetan's precedent if the *De immortalitate animae* had no repercussions on Pomponazzi's career.

Let's come then to the third main character of this reconstruction,

Crisostomo Javelli, who is known for a completely different role, and for a very specific reason.⁴ As we have seen, in accordance with the provisions of the *Apostolici regiminis*, the philosophy professors were required to confute the arguments against the faith. But Pomponazzi, in his third treatise published after the *De immortalitate animae*, namely the *Defensorium* (in which he responded to Augustine Nifo's criticisms) had not obeyed the requirements of the papal bull. He actually had not confuted the philosophical arguments adduced by him in support of the mortality of the soul. For this reason the book was censored. Pomponazzi, however, refused to write these confutations in his own hand, and asked for help from a theologian, Javelli, at that time regent of the Studium of the Dominican Order in Bologna, so that Javelli did it in his place. By an exchange of letters between Pomponazzi and Javelli, we know that Javelli accepted the task and wrote the *Solutiones rationum animi mortalitatem probantium quae in Defensorio contra Niphum excellentissimi domini Petri Pomponatii formantur*.⁵ Javelli's *Solutiones* were attached to the text of the *Defensorium*, and in this way Pomponazzi obtained the approval for its printing.

However, beyond this episode, at

1 For Prierias, see Prierias 1575, fol.19; for Spina 1519, see *Flagellum*, in *Opuscula*, fol. K4v.

2 Almost all chapter 5 of book I in Prierias 1575, fol.19-42 is devoted to contradict Cajetan's point of view on the Aristotelian psychology; and even if the name of Cajetan is never mentioned, Prierias quotes several pieces from Cajetan's commentary on the *De anima*. On Prierias, his friendship with Spina and his antagonism to Cajetan, see Tavuzzi 1995, who suggest a sort of agreement between Prierias and his beloved disciple Spina, according to which, for reasons of decorum, would have been the simple friar Spina instead of the powerful Master of the Sacred Palace to attack openly Cajetan; see also Tavuzzi 1997.

3 See Tavuzzi 1995, p. 101.

4 On life, career and works of Javelli, see Chenu 1925, cols. 535-537; Tavuzzi 1990, pp. 457-482; Tavuzzi 1991, pp. 107-121; and Tavuzzi 1992, cols. 563-566.

5 The correspondence between Pomponazzi and Javelli is printed in Pomponazzi 1525, see Pomponazzi 2014, pp. 2064-2070.

a distance of about fifteen years from the writing of these theological solutions, Javelli also produced two original works on the philosophical question of the immortality of the human soul, in which was expressed his opinion on the thesis of both Cajetan and Pomponazzi: the *Super tres libros Aristotelis de anima quaestiones subtilissimae*, published in 1534, and the *Tractatus de animae humanae indeficientia*, published in 1536.

In Javelli's philosophical intervention we can identify two important new elements compared with Spina's: Javelli mitigates Pomponazzi's position by considering it as a simple exegetical position; Javelli justifies the possibility of interpreting Aristotle's words in a mortalistic sense on the basis of the partiality of the same Aristotelian point of view.

The first point is evident in several places; firstly in the letter which Javelli wrote to Pomponazzi when he accepted the task for the *Defensorium*:

"Mirabantur et dolent quamplures tibi obsequentissimi, qui te ut patrem diligunt et optimum philosophum ac praeceptorem colunt et venerantur, quod in hanc veneris diffinitivam Aristotelis sententiam, Aristotelem prorsus sensisse humanum animum mortalem simpliciter esse, secundum quid vero immortalem. Mirantur et magis quod fidissimo duce tuo et meo Thome terga dederis, qui insequens dicta ac ipsa formaliter verba Aristotelis deducit et concludit oppositum sententiae tuae."¹

1 Pomponazzi 2014, p. 2066.

Rebuilding the controversy aroused by the *De immortalitate animae*, Javelli says that many people were disappointed about the mortalistic interpretation that Pomponazzi had given of Aristotle and especially because Pomponazzi had turned his back on Thomas Aquinas – who Javelli, talking to Pomponazzi, defines surprisingly as "our common master".

In the *Quaestiones subtilissimae*, the name of Pomponazzi is closely associated with that of Cajetan:

"Et quoniam Petrus Pomponatius Mantuanus nihil novi dicit quod non fuerit tactum a Thoma Caietano ideo simul improbabilimur."²

Pomponazzi is considered to be Cajetan's follower. Javelli believes that in the *De animae immortalitate* Pomponazzi did not say anything new compared to Cajetan, and that for this reason there is no need to refute Pomponazzi's position separately. Shortly after, Javelli associates the name of Pomponazzi also to that of Scotus, saying that almost all of the arguments raised by Pomponazzi against an immortalistic interpretation of Aristotle had already been raised both by Cajetan and Scotus.³ For these reasons in the *Quaestiones subtilissimae* Javelli devotes little space to the criticism of Pomponazzi's position.

In the *Tractatus de animae humanae indeficientia*, instead, Cajetan and Pomponazzi each receive their own space.⁴ In this book Javelli makes a clear

2 Javellus 1552, fol. 131v.

3 See Javellus 1552, fol. 139r.

4 Javelli devotes to de Vio and Pomponazzi,

distinction between the two authors:

“Thomas quoque Caietanus, licet diffinite posuerit Aristotelem pro certo tenuisse animae deficientiam, tamen in processu suo prudenter se habuit, eo quod ad hoc comprobandum, non nisi ex textu philosophi rationes suas, suaque motiva assumpsit [...]. Petrus autem Pomponatius magis importune et onerosius se habuit, qui non solum ex apparentibus verbis Aristotelis de paucis rationibus in superficie littere Aristotelis fundatis, sed ex omni etiam levissimo argumento erexit se contra propositum nostrum [...]. Est enim perfacile videre quod ad id quod firma ratione persuadere diffidebat, multiplicatis argutiis auditorum animos, et moderni temporis philosophos allicere studuit.”¹

Cajetan based his mortalistic arguments on Aristotle’s text only; Pomponazzi worked hard to fascinate the philosophers of his own time.

This judgment is made clear by Javelli in the chapter of the *Tractatus de animae humanae indeficientia* monographically dedicated to Pomponazzi:

“...Petrus Pomponacius Mantuanum duos edidit libros de hac materia, in primo quidem conatur omni via ostendere Aristotelem tenuisse animae nostrae deficientiam. In secundo autem, quem composuit contra Augustinum Nifum Suessanum tenentem oppositum, adeo multiplicat rationes ad astruendam mortalitatem animae, quod videt non solum hoc tenere de

mente Aristotelis, sed et simpliciter....”²

Here Javelli says that Pomponazzi wrote two books on the subject of the immortality of the human soul: the *De immortalitate animae* and the *Defensorium* (not counting the *Apologia*). Javelli adds that it is only in the *Defensorium* that Pomponazzi exaggerates in producing arguments in support of the mortality of the soul. In the *De immortalitate animae*, according to Javelli, Pomponazzi defends the mortalistic thesis merely from Aristotle’s point of view. In short, for the *Tractatus de animae humanae indeficientia* too, Pomponazzi’s thesis is a purely exegetical thesis, just like that of Cajetan.

This opinion of Javelli seems to find a further confirmation in the *Tractatus de animae humanae indeficientia*. In chapter IV of part III of the treatise, Javelli presents a kind of anthropological classification of those, among the ancients and the modern, who have supported the mortality of the soul. And here, after the unholy, the slothful, the delinquents, the insane and the melancholic people, those who have Saturn and Mercury retrograde and those who are agitated by fervor of youth, appear to be those who supported the mortalistic thesis although they were not of this opinion:

“Qui autem eorum sententiam defensare contendunt etiam qui non sint illius mentis, aut nimis curiosi sunt aut singularis nominis cupidi [...]. Nimis autem curiosus est qui in nulla ratione quiescit, qui proposito

respectively, chapter IV and chapter V of part I of the treatise.

1 Javellus 1536, fol. 44v-45r.

2 Javellus 1536, fol. 24r.

decrevit nil acceptare, nisi quod proprio metitus fuerit ingenio. Sunt et alii, qui ut se supra alios famosos reddant, videanturque novi aliquid invenisse, probatas conclusiones et a bonis ac eruditissimis viris defensatas impugnare aut infirmare decernunt, non quia firmiores habeant rationes, sed ut [...] extimentur ab aliis se solos sapientissimos evasisse atque advertisse neque in rebus neque in rationibus esse sanum aliquid aut firmum.”¹

This category is further divided into two types: the first comprises of those who are too curious and restless, who are not satisfied by any argument, and that do not stop to look – a description that seems to perfectly frame Cajetan’s attitude, because Cajetan, moving away from the classic exposition of Thomas Aquinas, had wanted personally to compete with the text of the *De anima*. The second type comprises of those who are desirous of fame, that is, those who, because of a spirit of competition, take position against those wise men who defended the immortalistic thesis, but without having stronger arguments – a description that seems to repeat Javelli’s reproach to Pomponazzi, namely that he wanted to fascinate the philosophers of his own time.

The second aspect that characterizes Javelli’s intervention is to consider Aristotle’s point of view as partial. This aspect is highlighted by Javelli in his letter to Pomponazzi. Here, expressing his position on Pomponazzi’s mortalistic exegesis, Javelli says he’s not at all

surprised by this result, for Pomponazzi knew very well the difference between Aristotle’s “ascending” way and Plato’s “descending” way:

“...Aristoteles elevans se per gradus (ut ita dixerim) sensatos, quantum a sensu elevatus tantum determinate et constanter philosophari potuit, at quamprimum manuductio ex sensu defecit, caligavit eius intellectus, ita quod vel illic gradum sistit, vel anceps, obnubilosus et abstrusus adeo loquitur quod dicta sua oppositos sensus videntur posse recipere. Inter haec iudicio tuo connumerandam censes humani animi considerationem, eo quod tibi persuades ex nullo suo opere apud Aristotelem posse comprehendi esse incorruptibilem, sed oppositum...”²

The method used by Aristotle is to start from the senses in order to rise from the most known things to the lesser known, and, gradually that as he ascends to the more intangible realities, his words become more and more obscure and lend themselves to different readings. This does not mean for Javelli that Aristotle considered our soul to be mortal, but only that Aristotle’s words sometimes can be misinterpreted, because of the limits and the partiality of his method. The problem of the Aristotelian point of view, however, is now shelved in the letter, because at this time Javelli had pledged to resolve the *Defensorium*’s mortalistic arguments by using the principles of the sacred theology and those of the true philosophy. But here Javelli tells us another interesting thing:

1 Javellus 1536, fol. 61r-66r.

2 Pomponazzi 2014, p. 2066.

“Solvam igitur quascumque rationes formasti mortalitatem probantes, principiis quidem non Aristotelis pronunc sed sacrae theologiae et verissimae philosophiae quam arbitramur nostrae catholicae fidei subministrare. Neque enim philosophia et Aristotelis philosophia convertuntur. Philosophia siquidem in se est scientia merae veritatis, quae est divina possessio nobis a patre luminum demissa.”¹

The true philosophy does not coincide with the Peripatetic philosophy, because the true philosophy is the science of the mere truth and its job is to give reinforcement to the Catholic faith.

This point is recalled in the *Tractatus de animae humanae indeficientia*. After challenging Pomponazzi’s mortalistic position and rehabilitating in its place the classic Thomistic and immortalistic position, Javelli says that in the *Defensorium* Pomponazzi lashed out against Augustine Nifo because the latter claimed to quibble about the condition of the soul in state of separation, for example about its way of knowing without using the senses, the premiums it receives for its virtues and the penalties that it suffers for its vices. All things that obviously have no place in the Aristotelian doctrine. But here is Javelli’s position:

“Nos autem dicimus quod et si haec expresse non habeantur in philosophia Aristotelis, quoniam ex sensu, a quo semper incepit philosophari, deprehendere non potuit ista [...] si

quis docuisset eum in solutionibus, quas adducemus, ut consonans vere philosophie, non negasse eas.”²

Javelli agrees with Pomponazzi on the fact that these arguments have no place in Aristotle, but this, once again, only because of the limits of Aristotle’s own method; if someone had shown these things to Aristotle, Javelli says, Aristotle would not have denied them. The problem is that Aristotle had not seen them. And for this reason Javelli underlines once again:

“...philosophia Aristotelis et philosophia ut philosophia non convertuntur. Nam philosophia in se est scientia mere veritatis et perfecta, philosophia autem Aristotelis non est perfecta nec in omnibus approbatur, et ideo posito quod ex philosophia Aristotelis non posset reddi certa ratio supradictorum, tamen ex ipsa philosophia reddetur, quia ut dixi Aristoteles audiens non negaret, licet sensu ad talem altitudinem ascendere non potuerit.”³

The Peripatetic philosophy is imperfect and incomplete, because Aristotle was not able to attain so high a level; which means that the Peripatetic philosophy is not the true philosophy.

In conclusion, with regard to the match between truth and interpretation, Spina and Javelli seem to hold two quite different positions. In Javelli’s it seems to be possible to find a greater tolerance for Cajetan’s and Pomponazzi’s interpretations; not because Javelli considers them

1 Pomponazzi 2014, p. 2068.

2 Javellus 1536, fol. 41v.

3 Javellus 1536, fol. 41v.

correct or plausible, but because, as mere exegetical positions, for the partiality of their point of view, these interpretations do not scratch the truth of things. For Spina, conversely, those of Cajetan and Pomponazzi are not “innocuous” exegetical positions; for him, one cannot advance a moralistic interpretation of Aristotle’s psychology without endangering the agreement between human reason and Revelation. Actually, if we have to judge the results of Cajetan’s and Pomponazzi’s research, we must say that Spina was right and that Javelli was wrong: Cajetan’s and Pomponazzi’s theses were not mere exegetical positions. For Pomponazzi, we know that he came to radicalize his position arriving at the theory of divisibility of the soul in *De nutritione et augmentatione* of the 1521 and, more generally, that he continued his “anti-theological” battle with the *De incantationibus* and the *De fato*. Cajetan, as we have seen, after giving up Aristotle’s basis, came to definitively giving up the possibility of proving the immortality of the soul, and facing of this issue, as in confronting an article of faith, to confess his ignorance.

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