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**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 CEFFONS**

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**BETTER OFF DEAD: THE LATITUDE OF HUMAN MISERY IN THE OXFORD  
REPLICATIONES OF THE DOMINICAN ROBERT HOLCOT AND THE PARISIAN *PRINCIPIA*  
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CHRIS SCHABEL AND MONICA BRÎNZEI\*

In “The Rage,” one of the gems on Judas Priest’s classic metal album *British Steel* of 1980,<sup>1</sup> vocalist Rob Halford bellows, “Is pain better than the grave?” He was not the first to ask the question, and Pasquale Porro and Guy Guldentops are among those who have investigated, respectively, the thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century discussion and the late-scholastic background to Hamlet’s “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy.<sup>2</sup> There was a mid-fourteenth-century twist in this history, in terms of both doctrinal approach and institutional context. It is no secret that theologians in the mid-fourteenth century were obsessed with the mathematical language of limits and latitudes,<sup>3</sup> and it is thus no surprise that questions of life and death would be approached in a similar fashion. Inspired by their Oxonian predecessor the Dominican Robert Holcot, who debated with a *socius* on the issue in the early 1330s, in the 1340s the Parisian Cistercians Jean de Mirecourt and Pierre Ceffons expanded the limits of the topic of choosing death over life in their debates with their own *socii* in the context of their *principia* on the *Sentences*.

The genre of *principia* encouraged excess. In the mid-fourteenth century, in late September and early October, ten or so bachelors of the *Sentences* at the University of Paris would take turns each legible day giving a sermon in praise of theology or Peter Lombard or his *Sentences*, protest that they did not mean to say anything heretical or otherwise nasty in what followed, and then launch into a question in which they defended a thesis that they had already distributed in writing to their fellow bachelors, their *socii*.

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<sup>1</sup> JUDAS PRIEST, *British Steel* released on 14 April 1980.

<sup>2</sup> P. PORRO, “Essere o non essere? Dubbi amletici tra le questioni scolastiche”, in *Scientia, fides, theologia: studi di filosofia medievale in onore di Gianfranco Fioravanti*, ed. S. PERFETTI, Pisa 2011, 333–56; G. GULDENTOPS, “Spätscholastische Antworten auf die Hamlet-Frage”, in *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* 61 (2016), 9–51.

<sup>3</sup> Although K. MICHALSKI, *La philosophie au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle. Six études*, ed. K. FLASCH, Frankfurt 1969, touched on this aspect of fourteenth-century thought in his collected studies from 1922–1937, the classic study remains J.E. MURDOCH, “*Mathesis in philosophiam scholasticam introducta: The Rise and Development of the Application of Mathematics in Fourteenth Century Philosophy and Theology*”, in *Arts libéraux et philosophie au moyen âge*, Montréal/Paris 1969, 215–54.

While answering his chosen question with his thesis of choice, each *sententiarius* was supposed to attack one or more of the theses of his associates, to make it challenging for the bachelors and fun for the audience, since the Faculty of Theology suspended all other activities to watch the show.<sup>4</sup> Principal sermons were already a century old,<sup>5</sup> but insofar as *principia* included debated questions, the genre seems to have originated at Paris in the 1310s, spread to Oxford by the early 1330s, and reached full maturity at Paris in the 1340s. For the academic years 1344–45 and 1348–49 we have enough data to piece together lists of all ten bachelors of the *Sentences* at Paris in those years, the rough sequence in which they gave their first *principia*, and even the theses they defended, although more accurately and fully for the year of the Black Death, 1348–49, than for 1344–45.<sup>6</sup> The most influential theologians of these two academic years were the Augustinian Hermits Alfonso Vargas of Toledo and Hugolino of Orvieto for 1344–45 and 1348–49 respectively,<sup>7</sup> but the most interesting and controversial were their Cistercian *socii* Jean de Mirecourt and Pierre Ceffons. Both Cistercians found an opportunity to attack their *socii*'s theses with arguments linked to the subject of this volume. In 1344–45 it was Jean de Mirecourt against the Benedictine Jean de Blesis, Mirecourt being the seventh bachelor in sequence and Blesis being the sixth. In 1348–49 it was Pierre Ceffons, again number seven, as was apparently traditional for the Cistercians, against the fourth bachelor, Jean Charel d'Aubepierre of the Collège de Navarre. The Cistercians continued where the Dominican Robert Holcot had left off in his Oxford debate with the Franciscan William Chitterne in 1331–32.

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<sup>4</sup> The genre is the subject of the ERC consolidator-grant project DEBATE, with Monica Brinzei as Principal Investigator. On the genre, see *Principia on the Sentences*, ed. M. BRÎNZEI – W.O. DUBA (Studia Sententiarum), Turnhout, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Almost nothing has been written about these thirteenth-century *principia* on the *Sentences* since the notes in M.-D. CHENU, “Maitres et bacheliers de l'Université de Paris v. 1240: description du manuscrit Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 15652”, in *Etudes d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale*, Paris 1932, 11–39, but see examples in M. GRABMANN, “Romanus de Roma O. P. (gest. 1273) und der Prolog seines Sentenzenkommentars”, in *Divus Thomas* (Ser. 3), 19 (1941), 166–94, and W. DUBA – C. SCHABEL, “Remigio, Scotus, Auriol, and the Myth of the Two-Year *Sentences* Lecture at Paris”, in *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 84 (2017), 143–79, at 152–56, based on the editions of Emilio Panella.

<sup>6</sup> See C. SCHABEL, “The Genre Matures. Parisian *Principia* in the 1340s, from Gregory of Rimini to Pierre Ceffons”, in *Principia on the Sentences*, ed. BRÎNZEI – DUBA, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Their works have been printed as ALPHONSUS VARGAS TOLETANUS, *Lectura in primum Sententiarum*, Venezia 1490, transcribed by Luciana Cioca and online on the website of Monica Brinzei's ERC starting-grant project THESIS: <http://thesis-project.ro/alphonsusvargas/texts.html>), and *Hugolini de Urbe Veteri OESA Commentarius in quattuor libros Sententiarum*, ed. W. ECKERMANN with V. MARCOLINO, 4 vols. (Cassiciacum, Supplementband 8–11), Würzburg 1980–88.

## I. Robert Holcot OP vs. William Chitterne OFM, Oxford 1331–32

Pasquale Porro has outlined the discussion on the issue of voluntary death in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century through the texts of Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, John Peckham, Henry of Ghent, Roger Marston, and Durand of Saint-Pourçain, who all rejected suicide as an alternative to a painful life.<sup>8</sup> Porro does not take as his point of departure Henry of Ghent's *Quodlibet* XII, question 13, *Utrum non sperans vitam futurum debeat secundum rectam rationem eligere mori pro patria*, a question that attracted the interest of other scholars due to its connection to political thought and the classical tradition, although the title of the question itself contains some of the essential terms of the later debate discussed below, *debere*, *recta ratio*, and *eligere*. Porro focused instead on the legitimacy of choosing non-existence to avoid extreme unhappiness, or whether one must always choose existence over non-existence, reflected in Henry's *Quodlibet* I, question 20: *Utrum magis sit eligendum non esse omnino quam in miseria esse*.

As Porro notes, this issue also arose in questions on book IV of the *Sentences*, where theologians of the second half of the thirteenth century asked whether the damned do or should prefer non-existence to their fate and to what extent this would be a reasonable choice. They admitted that the damned in fact would rather not exist, in terms of what is *magis appetendum*, since they want to avoid eternal pain. Yet they countered with a passage from book III of Augustine's *De libero arbitrio* arguing that being is always preferable to non-being when one makes a *reasoned* choice, partly on neo-Platonic grounds, because non-being is nothing and therefore not a possible object of choice. Henry of Ghent's question was more broad and employed passages from Aristotle's *Ethics* that supported non-existence over miserable existence or even – or especially – less virtuous existence. The issue was indeed quite complicated, because of the Christian and pagan perspectives, with and without an afterlife, Christian sin vs. pagan vice, and a dash of pro- and anti- neo-Platonism, but also because of the notion of right reason vs. corrupted reason, particularly the flawed deliberation of the sinner and the damned.

Jean de Mirecourt was aware of this earlier discussion, quoting from Bonaventure's questions on the *Sentences*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, and pertinent passages in Augustine, but

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<sup>8</sup> PORRO, "Essere o non essere?"

his immediate inspiration was probably Robert Holcot.<sup>9</sup> One of us has recently argued that Oxford lectures on the *Sentences* in the fourteenth century lasted only one year, that Holcot read the *Sentences* during the 1331–32 academic year, and that he debated with fellow *sententiarii* – notably the Franciscan Adam Wodeham – and also bachelors of theology who were lecturing on the Bible, members of both groups being called *socii*.<sup>10</sup> Although on another topic Holcot had exchanges with Wodeham in their *principia*, most of our evidence for Holcot’s debate over death with Wodeham’s confrère William Chitterne comes in the form of a set of Holcot’s *replicationes* that may not be principal, since the Oxford statutes allowed such *replicationes* in both the first (the *introitus*, another word for *principia*) and last lectures for each book of the *Sentences* as well as on one other occasion during each of the three terms of the academic year.<sup>11</sup> One incomplete set of Holcot’s *replicationes* has long been familiar to students of fourteenth-century Oxford, the so-called *Sex articuli*, only four of which are actually addressed. In the first three articles, Holcot’s opponent was the Dominican William Crathorn, who in his first Bible lecture had attacked Holcot. We may thus have reason to believe that the opposing *socius* in the fourth and final article, the Franciscan Chitterne, was also a senior *biblicus* instead of a co-*sententarius*, since at Oxford bachelors of theology lectured on the Bible after the *Sentences*, whereas the reverse was true at Paris.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> MICHALSKI, *La philosophie au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 375 n.1, notes an explicit citation of Holcot on the very first page, f. 1r, of the Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska 1184, copy of Mirecourt’s *Sentences* questions (book I) and again in the margin of the verso. For Mirecourt and Oxonians in general, see especially J.E. MURDOCH, “*Subtilitates anglicanae* in the Fourteenth Century: John of Mirecourt and Peter Ceffons”, in *Machaut’s World: Science and Art in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. M.P. COSMAN – B. CHANDLER (Annals of the New York Academy of Science 314), New York 1978, 51–86; J.-F. GENEST – P. VIGNAUX, “La bibliothèque anglaise de Jean de Mirecourt: ‘subtilitas’ ou plagiat?”, in *Die Philosophie im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert. In Memoriam Konstanty Michalski 1879–1947*, ed. O. PLUTA (Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie 10), Amsterdam 1988, 275–301; and M. [BRINZEI] CALMA, “Jean de Mirecourt et les échos de la philosophie anglaise à l’Université de Paris au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in *Universalità della ragione. Pluralità delle filosofie nel Medioevo. Atti del XII Congresso Internazionale di Filosofia Medievale*, ed. A. MUSCO – R. GAMBINO – L. PEPI – P. SPALLINO – M. VASALLO, Palermo 2012, part 2, 471–80. For Mirecourt and Holcot, see also W.J. COURTENAY, “Erfurt CA 2 127 and the Censured Articles of Mirecourt and Autrecourt”, in *Die Bibliotheca Amploniana. Ihre Bedeutung im Spannungsfeld von Aristotelismus, Nominalismus und Humanismus*, ed. A. SPEER (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 23), Berlin 1995, 341–52, at 346–47.

<sup>10</sup> C. SCHABEL, “Ockham, the *Principia* of Holcot and Wodeham, and the Myth of the Two-Year *Sentences* Lecture at Oxford”, in *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 87 (2020), forthcoming. On Holcot’s life, works, and ideas, see now J.T. SLOTEMAKER – J.C. WITT, *Robert Holcot*, Oxford 2016.

<sup>11</sup> A.G. LITTLE, *The Grey Friars in Oxford. Part I: A History of the Convent. Part II: Biographical Notices of the Friars*, Oxford 1892, 46, and n. 6: “Non replicet pluries quam semel in termino, ultra introitus librorum, et cessationes eorumdem; introitus enim et cessationes librorum, ac recitatio locorum ad materiam propriam pertinens, ... pro replicationibus minime computantur.”

<sup>12</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *Sex articuli* a.1, ed. F. HOFFMANN, *Die Conferentiae des Robert Holcot O.P. und die akademischen Auseinandersetzungen an der Universität Oxford 1330–1332* (Beiträge zur Geschichte

William Chitterne, from the custody of Bristol, is recorded as living in Salisbury in July 1325, but in February 1326 he was lector at the Winchester convent when he was licensed to hear confessions in that diocese. He was the 53rd lector or regent master at the *studium generale* at Cambridge, but the “ca. 1330” date generally given for this does not fit well with the approximate dates of the other Cambridge lectors, the 48th being set in 1329, the 49th through 52nd in ca.1330–33, and the 54th through 56th in ca. 1335–37. It seems that we should instead put Chitterne in Cambridge in ca. 1334. It is probable that Chitterne had studied theology at the Oxford or Cambridge convent when he was assigned to teach theology at the Winchester convent in the second half of 1325. If he was qualified to be regent master in Cambridge in ca. 1334, he needed to fulfill all the requirements by then.<sup>13</sup> Under normal circumstances it would thus make better sense to have him lecturing on the *Sentences* at Oxford alongside William Crathorn in 1330–31 and then reading the Bible with Crathorn there in 1331–32, rather than to push the dates forward to 1331–32 and 1332–33. Thus Chitterne most likely was a *biblicus* when he engaged in disputes with Robert Holcot.<sup>14</sup>

Holcot and other bachelors that year seem to have read the four books of the *Sentences* in the sequence I-IV-II-III, as was still the case at Paris at that point. By Holcot’s own admission, his debate with Chitterne, which involved several themes, began in question 3 of book I of Holcot’s *Sentences* lectures in the fall of 1331, although the topic of present interest first appears on the record in Holcot’s question 7 of book IV, probably from

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der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters – Neue Folge 36), Münster 1993, 67.4–5: “Contra tres primos articulos, arguit quidam socius reverendus in sua prima lectione Super Bibliam”; a.4, 110.1: “Istud dictum non placet cuidam alteri socio fratri minori.” H. SCHEPERS, “*Holcot contra dicta Crathorn* I. Quellenkritik und biographische Auswertung der Bakkalareatsschriften zweier Oxforder Dominikaner des XIV. Jahrhunderts”, in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 77 (1970), 320–54, at 342, correctly identified Chitterne as the Franciscan, but Hoffmann, who knew Crathorn, did not take notice of this in his edition, thinking instead that the Franciscan was perhaps Walter Chatton: HOFFMANN, “Einführung”, in ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *Sex articuli*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> J.R.H. MOORMAN, *The Grey Friars in Cambridge 1225–1538. The Birkbeck Lectures 1948–9*, Cambridge 1952, 163 for Chitterne; C.K. BRAMPTON, “Chronological Gleanings from Martival Episcopal Register, Salisbury II, and Ms. London, British Museum, Cotton Charter XXX.40”, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 58 (1965), 369–93, at 380; D. RAYNAUD, “Le raisonnement expérimental en physique et en sociologie”, in *Philosophia Scientiae* 23.2 (2019), 19–46, at 26.

<sup>14</sup> K.H. TACHAU, “Robert Holcot on Contingency and Divine Deception”, in *Filosofia e teologia nel trecento: Studi in ricordo di Eugenio Randi*, ed. L. BIANCHI (Textes et Études du Moyen Âge 1), Turnhout 1994, 157–96, at 159–60, assuming a two-year lecture, has Chitterne as bachelor of the *Sentences* with Holcot in 1331–32, but suggests that while Holcot read the *Sentences* for a second year, in 1332–33, in which year she assigns the pertinent *Sex articuli* (and books III-IV), Chitterne was probably instead been *biblicus*. In effect, then, Tachau guesses that in their main interactions Holcot was *sententiarius* and Chitterne *biblicus*, which accords with our hypothesis.

lectures given in January or February of 1332. Chitterne took issue with what Holcot had said in these and probably other lectures, and Holcot replied first, it seems, in his *Sex articuli*, concerning other problems, perhaps while reading book II in March or April, and finally, in a set of eight articles against Chitterne, Holcot replied concerning the present subject, probably while lecturing on book III in May or June.<sup>15</sup> Some of Chitterne's ideas and perhaps even his own words survive in a few folios of Oxford, Merton College 113, ff. 218vb–233rb,<sup>16</sup> which also contains a copy of Holcot's *Sentences* questions, but for this issue we rely on what Holcot tells us.

Although the debate between Holcot and Chitterne demonstrates that there could be sharp divides on this issue, the discussion does not involve much innovation in terms of authorities or arguments, and thus it will serve as a good summary of the *status quaestionis* in 1331–32. Our story begins in what is in most witnesses question 2 of Holcot's I *Sentences*, although in the Lyon printings (1497, 1505, 1510, and 1518) and in a few of the ca. 40 manuscripts that carry the text it is question 3, *Utrum voluntas creata in utendo et fruendo sit libera libertate contradictionis*.<sup>17</sup> In responding to the first sub-argument of the fourth principal argument, Holcot remarks:

But I say that one can give a judgment of reason against which the will cannot will, such as this: 'One should not live in misery'. Because it is impossible, as I hold for the time being, for the will to want to be miserable, although it can want not to be blessed, or it can want not to exist, as will be said in the next question.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For the exchanges between Holcot and Chitterne, although not on this issue, see SCHEPERS, "Holcot contra dicta Crathorn I", 342; TACHAU, "Robert Holcot on Contingency and Divine Deception", 184–89; H.G. GELBER, *It Could Have Been Otherwise. Contingency and Necessity in Dominican Theology at Oxford, 1300–1350* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 81), Leiden 2004, pp. 293–306; SLOTEMAKER – WITT, *Robert Holcot*, 261–64.

<sup>16</sup> "Utrum solus Deus sit a quacumque rationali creatura super omnia supreme diligendus". See TACHAU, "Robert Holcot on Contingency and Divine Deception", 184–86, nn. 72–73.

<sup>17</sup> The 1497 print served as the basis for the later ones. For the manuscripts (49 total including fragments), see the list in K.H. TACHAU, "Introduction", in ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *Seeing the Future Clearly: Questions on Future Contingents*, ed. EADEM – P.A. STREVELER, with W.J. COURTENAY – H.G. GELBER (Studies and Texts 119), Toronto 1995, 36–38, to which one must one described in J.T. SLOTEMAKER, "Robert Holcot's Commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, MS A.XI.36", in *Manuscripta* 60 (2016), 93–101.

<sup>18</sup> Note that the 1497 edition does not have convenient foliation, but the text has been transcribed from the 1518 edition by Daniel Coman for the ERC project THESIS and can be found online: <http://thesis-project.ro/robertusholcot/texts.html>. ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In I Sententiarum* q.2 ad 4<sup>m</sup> principale, formam 1, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): "Sed dico quod est dare tale iudicium rationis contra quod voluntas non potest velle, et tale iudicium est istud: 'Non est vivendum misere', quia impossibile est, sicut pro nunc

In that next question, number 3 (but number 4 in some witnesses and the Lyon editions), *Utrum viator teneatur frui solo Deo*, in the context of loving God above all else, the eleventh principal argument to the contrary is that humans are obliged to love themselves more than God. Among the sub-arguments is the *reductio ad absurdum*, for the one giving the argument, that otherwise humans should choose annihilation over sin, if faced with that choice.<sup>19</sup> Holcot's response at the conclusion of the question is brief: *dicitur quod sic*, meaning that annihilation is preferable to offending God by sinning mortally.<sup>20</sup> Under other circumstances, however, Holcot has a different view. In responding to an objection in the middle of the question, Holcot remarks that the objection would also entail that, given a choice, one should choose annihilation or damnation to save the community, *quod est falsum*.<sup>21</sup> In the same context another argument is given to the effect that humans naturally and rationally love goodness and truth more than their own existence, and if one must risk death for one's friends, then all the more so one must sacrifice one's life for the truth.<sup>22</sup> Holcot responds that this is a weak argument, a rationalization of what is believed by the common people or stipulated in human laws. If the argument were cogent, it would prove that humans must always prefer misery or

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teneo, quod voluntas velit se esse miseram, licet possit velle se non esse beatam, vel possit velle se non esse, sicut in proxima quaestione dicitur.”

<sup>19</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In I Sententiarum* q.3 11<sup>m</sup> principale, forma 2, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Praeterea, nisi homo magis deberet se diligere quam Deum, sequeretur quod homo magis deberet eligere adnihilationem sui, posita perplexitate, quam peccare mortaliter. Consequens est falsum...”

<sup>20</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In I Sententiarum* q.3 ad 11<sup>m</sup> principale, formam 2, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Ad aliam formam, si homo deberet diligere Deum plus quam se, ergo deberet praeeligere suam adnihilationem potius quam peccare mortaliter, dicitur quod sic.”

<sup>21</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In I Sententiarum* q.3 a.2 ad arg. 4 contra 1<sup>am</sup> conc. 2<sup>ae</sup> diff., ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Ad quartum, quando dicitur quod bonum commune etc., potest dici quod, si istud argumentum concluderet, probaret quod homo magis deberet diligere communitatem quam semetipsum. Reveletur ergo alicui quod, si ipse adnihilaretur vel damnaretur, totaliter communitas salvabitur; quo posito, iste secundum argumentum deberet velle adnihilari, vel damnari, quod est falsum.”

<sup>22</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In I Sententiarum* q.3 a.2 contra 1<sup>am</sup> conc. 2<sup>ae</sup> diff., arg. 6, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Praeterea, homo, secundum naturam suam et rationem naturalem, magis debet diligere bonitatem et veritatem quam semetipsum vel suum esse; sed Deus est summa bonitas et summa veritas; igitur etc. Maior patet, I *Ethicorum*, capitulo 6. Secundum Thomam etiam pro salute veritatis oportet familiam destruere; et Philosophus. Ambobus enim existentibus amicis, sanctum est prae honorare veritatem. Ergo, si pro multitudine amicorum homo se debet morti exponere, quanto magis pro veritate? Sed quod pro multitudine amicorum homo se debeat morti exponere patet, quia aliter destrueretur omnis politia mundana et omnis defensio, ergo a multo fortiori debet homo Deum diligere super omnia.”



annihilation to save the truth, which Holcot apparently considers absurd.<sup>23</sup> Holcot has not addressed our question yet, except to insist that annihilation is preferable to mortal sin.

Brief as these remarks were, the fact that Holcot had alluded to them in the previous question indicates that he considered the topic significant. So did William Chitterne. Chitterne reacted to something else Holcot said in the same question 3 of book I, since Holcot tells us so in the *replicationes* in the *Sex articuli*, where he replies to Chitterne.<sup>24</sup> Even before these *replicationes*, Holcot had responded to Chitterne's criticism in book IV, question 7, *Utrum peccator possit satisfacere Deo pro peccato mortali*, where the fifth principal argument allows Holcot to return to the subject: if a sinner really had to do full satisfaction for God for her sin, she would have to be ground to bits, so it is better for her to choose not to exist or to be annihilated rather than to relapse into mortal sin.<sup>25</sup>

To this, according to the Lyon editions, "some people" respond that "every man should rather choose to sin and to remain in perpetual pain than not to be at all with respect to body and soul, which is to be annihilated." Instead of "some people," at least one of the best manuscripts, Cambridge, Pembroke College Library 236, has what seems to be the earliest version, reading that "a certain reverend *socius*" says this, whom we can identify as Chitterne.<sup>26</sup> Holcot's Franciscan *socius* forms three neo-Platonic arguments from the classic passages in book III of Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*. First, choosing (*eligit*) non-existence is equivalent to choosing nothing, which is impossible. Second, one must will what is best, but non-existence cannot be better than any existence. Third, one chooses (*eligit*) by reason in order to become better, but she who does not exist cannot become better: "'Therefore no one can choose (*eligere*) not to exist' – the words are Augustine's."

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<sup>23</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In I Sententiarum* q.3 a.2 ad arg. 6 contra 1<sup>am</sup> conc. 2<sup>ae</sup> diff., ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): "Ad sextum potest dici quod illa sunt mere credita vel a creditis deducta. Unde, sicut philosophi suam philosophiam practicam sive speculativam miscuerunt cum opere vulgi, ita etiamsuam scientiam moralem cum legibus statutis miscuerunt, volentes dare rationem eorum omnium quae legibus praecipiebantur. Unde si ista ratio concluderet, probaret quod homo magis debet et semper velle esse miser, vel adnihilari pro veritate sustinenda."

<sup>24</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *Sex articuli* introductio, ed. HOFFMANN, 66.16-17: "Quintus articulus fuit dictus in materia de fruitione q. 3 Super primum et fuit talis: Casu possibili posito..." The fourth article is not addressed separately, so the fifth article becomes the fourth later on, 108.13: "Quartus articulus fuit quod casu possibili posito..."

<sup>25</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): "Quinto ad principale. Si peccator teneretur satisfacere Deo pro peccato, oporteret eum conteri de suo peccato et, per consequens, magis deberet se velle non esse et adnihilari, quam recidivare in peccatum mortale."

<sup>26</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): "Hic dicitur a quibusdam quod quilibet homo magis deberet eligere peccare et in perpetua poena manere quam omnino non esse quoad corpus et quoad animam, quod est adnihilari." Cambridge, Pembroke College Library 236, f. 102ra: "Hic autem a quodam socio reverendo dicitur..."

Thus Chitterne argued both that no one can desire (*appetere*) not to exist or to be annihilated – indeed, that this would entail a contradiction – and that this is what Augustine strove to prove.<sup>27</sup>

Holcot thinks little of these arguments, remarking that they either equivocate about good and bad or can be used against Chitterne: “With the same reason I could prove that a human cannot flee, nill, or detest non-existence, because whoever flees, flees or detests something, but non-existence is not something.”<sup>28</sup> Chitterne does manage to push the discussion in a new direction, however. Holcot had argued that non-existence is preferable to existing in mortal sin, but he disagreed that humans *should* choose annihilation for other reasons. Chitterne’s retort is that annihilation should never, in fact *can* never, be chosen for any reason whatsoever, including to avoid sinning. Holcot now insists that “a person can choose to be annihilated after a sure deliberation,” that this is what Augustine meant, and that Augustine did not thereby contradict himself.<sup>29</sup>

For Holcot, one can choose annihilation as the best or least bad option through reason, whether right or erroneous reason, since God could cause such a judgment in one’s mind or one could reach that conclusion through a good or sophistical argument.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the damned *de facto* would rather not exist, and Holcot speaks “via experience”:

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<sup>27</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Et hoc videtur probare Augustinus, *De libero arbitrio*, capitulo 13 per tres rationes. Primo sic: qui dicit ‘mallem hoc quam illud’, eligit aliquid; non esse autem non est aliquid, sed nihil; ergo nullo pacto potest aliquis eligere, quando eligit quod non est. Secundo sic: aut debuisti velle esse, cum sis miser, vel non esse. Non esse quidem potius. Tunc arguit Augustinus: si hoc velle debuisti, hoc est melius; quod autem non est, melius esse non potest; non ergo illud velle debuisti. Tertio sic: ‘quod quisquis eligit ratione petendum, cum ad illud pervenerit, necesse est ut melior fiat. Melior autem esse non poterit qui non erit. Nemo ergo potest eligere ut non sit’ – verba Augustini sunt. Et consequenter propter ista videtur multis quod Augustinus nitatur probare ibi ex intentione quod homo non potest appetere non esse et quod includit contradictionem quod homo velit se adnihilari.”

<sup>28</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Ad primam rationem, dico quod per eandem rationem probarem quod homo non potest fugere, vel nolle, vel detestari non esse, quia qui fugit, aliquid fugit vel detestatur; sed non esse non est aliquid.”

<sup>29</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Sed contra istum modum ponendi arguo et probo primo quod homo potest ex certa deliberatione eligere se adnihilari; secundo, quod hoc intendit Augustinus in re ibidem; tertio, applicabo verum intellectum dictis Augustini ne videantur habere contradictionem.”

<sup>30</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Primo argo sic: omne illud quod potest iudicari esse melius vel minus malum, sive a ratione recta sive errante, potest conformiter eligi; sed adnihilari est huiusmodi, et potest iudicari ab homine, sive ratione recta sive erronea, iudicante quod ipsum adnihilari est minus malum quam esse miserum; ergo adnihilari potest a tali eligi. Maior patet... Minor probatur, quia possibile est Deo causare tale iudicium in mente alicui quod ipsum adnihilari sit melius quam ipsum esse miserum vel minus malum... Similiter est possibile quod aliquis homo alteri homini faceret rationem aliquam bonam vel sophisticam quae sibi concluderet quod minus malum est non esse quam miserum esse.”

I have heard many of the faith, even now, existing in this life, who have no experience regarding this pain [of damnation], say that they would [in those circumstances] choose not to exist, if they could. And I myself experience this when I think about it, because in advance without difficulty I choose the one and abhor the other.<sup>31</sup>

Although he earlier argued that one *should* not, Holcot now also asserts that someone *could* choose annihilation for the common good, since he believes that gentiles (who did not believe in an afterlife) who allowed themselves to be killed for the *respublica* did precisely this.<sup>32</sup>

Holcot employs traditional vocabulary and distinctions that are important for the later Cistercian discussion. Mirecourt, Ceffons, and their sparring partners will talk in terms of what is *appetibile* and, more importantly, what is *fugibile*, what attracts as desirable and what repels and makes one flee, namely *malum*, the bad or evil. This *malum* is distinguished into the evil of sin or fault (*malum culpae*), the evil of the pain of the senses (*paena sensus*), or the evil of the pain of damnation (*paena damni*).<sup>33</sup> Although Holcot

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<sup>31</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Secundo, ad idem arguo quod etiam ratione non errante, si placeret Deo quod damnatus deberet perpetuo damnari, potius deberet eligere adnihilari... Ergo damnatus, appraehendens suum esse et suam poenam, apprehendit sine errore quod poena sua est appetitui suo magis disconveniens quam suum esse sit conveniens... Confirmatur istud per experientiam, quia multos fideles audivi quod sibi eligerent, si possent, etiam nunc in hac vita existentes, non esse, qui sunt totaliter interpreti poenae illius. Et ego hoc ipse experior continue quando de hoc delibero, quia sine difficultate unum praeeligo et aliud abhorreo.”

<sup>32</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Praeterea, homo potest velle aliquem hominem adnihilari propter bonum reipublicae, ita quod solus zelus reipublicae causat in eo istam volitionem. Igitur videtur pari ratione quod homo possit velle se non esse propter bonum reipublicae. Et puto eos sic voluisse qui existentes gentiles pro bono reipublicae tantum se interfici permiserunt.”

<sup>33</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Quaero enim si adnihilari est summe fugibile, utrum hoc est quia iudicat esse malum, an quia est malum. Primum rationabiliter non potest dici. Si dicatur quod est fugibile quia est malum, vel ergo quia est malum culpae, poenae, sensus, vel damni. Malum culpae esse non potest, certum est. Nec poena sensus, sicut patet. Relinquitur ergo quod sit poena damni; sed maius damnus est poena corrumpens omnem delectationem in sensualitate quam non esse, quia arguo sic: magis disconveniens est damnato sua poena, quam suum esse sit conveniens. Probo hoc, quia, si suum esse sibi sit magis conveniens quam sua poena disconveniens, plus haberet delectari de suo esse quam tristari de sua poena, quod non creditur de damnatis; ergo damnatus, appraehendens suum esse et suam poenam, apprehendit sine errore quod poena sua est appetitui suo magis disconveniens quam suum esse sit conveniens; ergo appraehendit sine errore quod suum non esse est minus suo appetitui disconveniens quam sua poena; ergo magis est eligibile, quia minus disconveniens est magis eligibile, sicut minus malum; quod est principium in practicis.”

was also a pioneer in mathematical theology of the kind that we shall see in Mirecourt and Ceffons, in this context he applied mathematics to the problem only briefly:

Furthermore, a person can want to be annihilated for five days, so she can want to be annihilated. The consequence is clear. I prove the antecedent via the conscience of every faithful person: if she were given the option, would she want to be damned perpetually or only not to exist for five days? Furthermore, being annihilated can be taken as a good thing and as a means to a good end, even by right reason, so it can be *appetibile*. I prove the antecedent: I posit that God reveals to you that, if you are willing to be annihilated for five days, He will restore you to eternal life. In this case, being annihilated would be *appetibile* and good.<sup>34</sup>

Thus when it comes to interpreting Augustine, Holcot is of the opinion that Augustine meant that one can deliberately choose not to exist in body and soul. True, anyone who believes in the immortality of the soul, according to Augustine, cannot really have such a correct *judgment* and choose annihilation upon *deliberation*, since it is not normally available, but one can be driven by flawed reasoning to desire death because of present torments and the dream of being without pain.

The entire question, without *apparatus*, would require about 12 pages to print in the present format, but the pertinent discussion, constituting the “fifth principal argument,” takes up about 5 pages, so Holcot and Chitterne considered it significant. Chitterne responded again and then Holcot replied in what at first glance seems an odd place, the question *Utrum Dei Filius potuit incarnari* in book III of the *Sentences*, in which the pertinent discussion in article 2 alone would require about 18 pages to print, the entire question being the equivalent of about 60 pages of text. In the Lyon printing and many of the more than three dozen manuscripts that contain the text, this is the only question for book III, and it appears that Holcot read book III last, making this the last question on the

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<sup>34</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In IV Sententiarum* q.7 5<sup>m</sup> principale, ed. Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Praeterea, homo potest velle adnihilari per quinque dies; ergo potest velle adnihilari. Consequentia patet. Antecedens proba per conscientiam cuiuslibet fidelis, si daretur sibi optio an vellet perpetuo damnari, an non esse per quinque dies tantum. Praeterea, adnihilari potest appraehendi ut bonum, et ut medium ad bonum finem etiam a ratione recta; ergo potest esse appetibile. Antecedens proba: pono quod Deus revelet tibi quod, si velles adnihilari per quinque dies, reparabit te ad vitam aeternam. Isto casu posito, adnihilari esset appetibile et bonum.”

*Sentences*, although in a more complete tradition preserved in three English manuscripts (London, British Library, Royal 10.C.VI; Oxford, Balliol College 71; and Oxford, Oriol College 15) three other questions for that book follow. In any case, this question reports a segment of a continuous debate with a single *socius*, William Chitterne.

The question is divided up into eight articles none of which has anything to do *prima facie* with the Incarnation. The tangential opening arguments are explicitly made in order to introduce these articles, and Royal 10.C.VI adds to the main tradition the following: “concerning which articles a certain reverend *socius* replies (*replicat*) subtly and acutely against certain things said, so there are eight articles that we have disputed between us in replying (*replicando*).” Another authoritative manuscript, Pembroke 236, has a shorter phrase, “concerning which a certain reverend *socius* replied (*replicavit*) subtly and acutely against me (*contra me*),” with the change in tense suggesting a later revision.<sup>35</sup> There are several later mentions of this single *socius* in the question, the Franciscan William Chitterne. Article 2 is of present interest: “Should someone choose to be annihilated more than to suffer infernal pain eternally, if God granted her free choice?” Articles three and four, however, are also pertinent: “Can the will be necessitated to will not to exist on account of pains?” and “In such a case where one can flee without harming anyone (*proximi*), can one licitly avoid through flight the death to which she has been condemned?”<sup>36</sup>

Holcot divides the second article, clearly an extensive expansion on the previous discussion in book IV, into five subarticles, the first of which will present the opposing opinion with its arguments, after which he will refute it, then, third, he will demonstrate that his debating partner gets Augustine wrong, then he will explain Augustine’s true meaning, before going back to his own original arguments. One can see the gradual de-contextualization of the response from Royal 10.C.VI to Pembroke 236 to the printed text, as Holcot first writes in Royal 10.C.VI that “a certain reverend person responds

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<sup>35</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1, London, British Library, Royal 10.C.VI, f. 76rb: “Sed ad istam quaestionem sic est argutum ut articuli introducentur, super quibus socius quidam reverendus subtiliter et acute replicat contra quaedam dicta. Unde 8 sunt articuli quos replicando discutimus inter nos.” Cf. Cambridge, Pembroke College Library 236, f. 75ra.

<sup>36</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1, London, British Library, Royal 10.C.VI, f. 76rb: “Secundus, an aliquis deberet potius eligere adnihilari quam puniri paena infernali aeternaliter, si Deus sibi conferret liberam electionem. Tertius articulus est an voluntas possit necessitari ad volendum non esse per paenas. Quartus, an constitutus in tali casu in quo potest fugere sine iniuria proximi licite potest declinare mortem ad quam damnatus est per fugam.”

thus,” which becomes “it is responded by some people” in Pembroke 236, and finally simply “it is responded” in the Lyon editions.<sup>37</sup>

Holcot seems to have won the first round, for William Chitterne now specifies that, all right, one can want (*velle*) not to be, since one can want the impossible, but one cannot choose (*eligere*) not to be, and in this he again follows what he considers to be Augustine’s meaning in book III of *De libero arbitrio*, although with longer quotations. Holcot summarizes Chitterne’s view as follows: “Concerning the second article, in brief the resolution of the *socius* in this question lies in this: that although a person can want not to be, nevertheless she cannot choose not to be, because the will (*voluntas*) is with regard to impossibles, but not choice (*electio*).”<sup>38</sup> Chitterne also grants that Holcot may have a point about choosing annihilation with reason, for example for five days, but only if the present law on the immortality of the soul is changed. As of now, however, one cannot choose it.<sup>39</sup>

Among Holcot’s arguments in response is simply that one can judge so erroneously that what is impossible seems possible, “as if I believed that I could build a tower that would extend beyond the heavens,” as did the sons of Noah, citing also an example from Suetonius in which Caligula orders his men to shoot the sky against Jupiter because it was raining on his parade. And Pagans and Saracens, after all, believe what is false.<sup>40</sup>

The discussion further develops what had been said earlier in book IV. Holcot first wishes to point out that *de facto*, in his words, “I said that such people who kill themselves because of intolerable miseries” aim at a rest from their misery, which is why they desire

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<sup>37</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1, London, British Library, Royal 10.C.VI, f. 78rb: “Ad articulum primum respondet quidam reverendus sic [respondetur ab aliquibus: Pembroke 236; respondetur: Lyons 1497].”

<sup>38</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1 a.1 subart. 1, Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Circa secundum articulum socii in hac quaestione resolutio stat breviter in isto: quod, licet homo possit velle non esse, non tamen potest eligere non esse, quia voluntas est impossibilium, sed electio non.”

<sup>39</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1 a.1 subart. 2, Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Praeterea, socius in respondendo ad quoddam argumentum meum quo volui probare quod homo potest eligere ratione non errante ad nihilari, concedit quod hoc est verum, lege mutata quae nunc est de immortalitate animae... Respondet socius quod istud argumentum non est contra eum, quia posuit quod leges nunc institutae non mutantur, sed, stante lege quae nunc est, non potest eligere non esse.”

<sup>40</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1 a.1 subart. 2, Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Praeterea, quaero utrum possit esse vera electio sequens iudicium an non. Si sic, igitur ponatur quod error sit tantus quod iudicet aliquid possibile esse quod impossibile est, sicut si crederem quod possem aedificare turrim quae se extenderet extra celum, sicut forte fuit de filiis Noe post diluvium; igitur possem hoc eligere. Narrat etiam Suetonius de Caio Caligula, libro suo *De vita 12 Caesarum*, sicut nunc occurrit, quod ipse iussit ballistarios et sagittarios dirigere tela in coelum contra Iovem, quia pluerat in festo regis. Si dicatur quod non est vera electio sequens iudicium erroneum, igitur sarraceni et pagani et credentes falsas sectas et propter illas multa facientes non vere eligent in talibus actibus.”

non-existence. Then, because Chitterne maintains that one should not prefer non-existence or annihilation to anything, not even to sinning eternally and being damned, Holcot tries to prove that a human should by reason choose non-existence over existence in misery under certain circumstances.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, that is as far as it goes, and although there is overlap with the Parisian debates to which we will now turn, the Oxford debate between the Dominican Holcot and the Franciscan Chitterne does not focus on specific circumstances in which one would desire death or on mathematical *reductiones ad absurdum*, which is the main attraction of the Cistercian *principia*.

## 2. Jean de Mirecourt OCist vs. Jean de Blesis OSB, Paris 1344–45

As far as we can tell, the Oxford debate between Robert Holcot and William Chitterne, surviving in dozens of manuscripts, was the main inspiration for the dispute recorded in the *principia* of Jean de Mirecourt, a monk of Cîteaux, the Cistercian *Sententiarius* at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris during the 1344–45 academic year. Mirecourt is best known for his being censured by the university authorities in 1347, and one of us has recently provided proofs for a more secure narrative of the remainder of Mirecourt’s life. Probably with royal support, Mirecourt was elected abbot of the important royal abbey of Royaumont north of Paris in early 1348, with Pope Clement VI confirming the election on 29 March, even though he had only given the monks of Royaumont permission to elect one of their own. On 5 July 1349 King Philip VI petitioned the pope to promote Abbot Jean to master of theology, even though the Cistercian could not reside in Paris due to his duties as abbot. The curia approved, despite Mirecourt’s earlier troubles, but he died in late 1349 or January 1350.<sup>42</sup> We do not know if he ever achieved the *magisterium*, but, if

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<sup>41</sup> ROBERTUS HOLCOT, *In III Sententiarum* q.1 a.1 subart. 1, Lyon 1497 (unfoliated): “Et quia dixi quod tales occidentes se pro miseriis intolerabilibus, simul cum hoc quod volunt esse, habent intentionem aliquam in mente coniunctam intentioni non essendi, puta intentionem quietis a miseria, propter quam intentionem appetunt non esse; et illa intentio non est quietis positivae sed negativae, contra hoc arguitur...”

<sup>42</sup> See SCHABEL, “The Genre Matures.” This proves the suggestion about Mirecourt’s being abbot of Royaumont proposed in K. MICHALSKI, “Le problème de la volonté à Oxford et à Paris au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *Studia philosophica* 2 (1937), 233–365, reprinted in K. MICHALSKI, *La philosophie au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle. Six études*, ed. K. FLASCH, Frankfurt 1969, 279–413, at 300–01 and n. 1 on 301, then doubted in G. TESSIER, “Jean de Mirecourt, philosophe et théologien”, in *Histoire littéraire de la France* 40 (1974), 1–52, 3 and n. 2. For the 1347 events, see F. STEGMÜLLER, “Die zwei Apologien des Jean de Mirecourt”, in *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 5 (1933), 40–78 and 192–204, and W.J. COURTENAY, “John of Mirecourt and Gregory of Rimini on Whether God Can Undo the Past”, in *Recherches de théologie*

he did, William Courtenay has found a possible candidate for Mirecourt's *Vesperies* in the promotion procedure, which would then have taken place in the fall of 1349.<sup>43</sup>

The *principia* of Jean de Mirecourt survive in half of the 22 manuscripts known to contain his questions on the *Sentences*.<sup>44</sup> Each of Mirecourt's four *quaestiones collativae*, or principial questions, is linked to the corresponding book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, on grace, causality, the incarnation, and the sacraments. There is no evident connection to suicide or the preference for death over life in these topics, but Mirecourt's *socius* provides the impetus. Having transcribed and studied a number several sets of *principia* from the fourteenth century, we note that bachelors of theology did not interact with their *socii* in a uniform manner, at least not in writing. In one extreme, all nine or so *socii* are mentioned by name and further identified, as in the case of the Parisian *principia* of the Augustinian Dionigi of Modena, the Franciscan Jean Regis, and the secular Pierre d'Ailly from Paris in the 1370s. In contrast, sometimes only vague formulas are used, such as "my reverend father," or the *socii* are not mentioned at all, as with the Bolognese *principia* of Agostino Favaroni of Rome from the 1380s.<sup>45</sup>

In his written *principia*, Jean de Mirecourt interacts with just one *socius*, whom he identifies just once, at the beginning of his first *principium*, as his "venerable *socius* the Black Monk, namely Jean le Norman." The Carmelite bachelor Paolo of Perugia and the Augustinian Hermit Alfonso Vargas supply the names of the remaining *socii* from that year, and Vargas calls one of his fellow bachelors *Johannes de Magno Monasterio*. Based

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*ancienne et médiévale* 39 (1972), 224–56, and 40 (1973), 147–74; and IDEM, "John of Mirecourt's Condemnation: Its Original Form", in *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 53 (1986), 190–91.

<sup>43</sup> COURTENAY, "Erfurt CA 2 127 and the Censured Articles of Mirecourt and Autrecourt", 345–50, rehearses the previous evidence for the abbacy of Royaumont (without King Philip's petition) and then discusses the *Vesperies* question on ff. 51ra–54ra.

<sup>44</sup> See <http://filosofia.dipafilo.unimi.it/~mparodi/mirecourt/home.htm>, which contains a transcription of book I by M. PARODI – E. RANDI – L. CACCIA DOMINIONI, and lists of manuscripts and questions. For Mirecourt's first *principium* below, we give the paragraph number in the online edition, although we have employed our own collation.

<sup>45</sup> On these figures and their *principia*, see M. BRÎNZEI, "When Theologians Play Philosopher: A Lost Confrontation in the *Principia* of James of Eltville and His *Socii* on the Perfection of Species and Its Infinite Latitude", in *The Cistercian James of Eltville († 1393). Author in Paris and Authority in Vienna*, ed. M. BRÎNZEI – C. SCHABEL (Studia Sententiarum 3), Turnhout 2018, 43–77; M. BRÎNZEI, "Theology versus Metaphysics: Augustinus Favaroni of Roma's *Principia* from the Faculty of Theology of Bologna", in *Principia on the Sentences*, ed. BRÎNZEI – DUBA, forthcoming; M. BRÎNZEI, "La faculté de théologie de Paris au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle à travers les lunettes de C.-E. du Boulay", in *Naissance d'une historiographie universitaire: César Egasse du Boulay (ca. 1600–1678), sources et méthodes d'un historien de l'université de Paris*, ed. T. AMALOU – T. KOUAMÉ, Paris, forthcoming (on Dionigi); M. BRÎNZEI, "Introduction", in PETRUS DE ALLIACO, *Questiones super primum, tertium et quartum librum Sententiarum. Principia et questio circa prologum*, ed. M. BRÎNZEI (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 258), Turnhout 2013, 9–13.



on what Vargas says about this *Johannes*' doctrine, we can rule out identifying him with the Cistercian Jean de Mirecourt, so the *Magnum Monasterium* must be Benedictine Marmoutier Abbey, which is thus the abbey of Jean le Norman. Papal letters allow us to identify him with the Jean de Blesis, master of theology by May 1349, who became prior of Benedictine Saint-Martin-au-Val near Chartres and in September 1363 was made abbot of Benedictine Saint-Pierre-aux-Monts in the diocese of Châlons, remaining abbot until at least May 1375.<sup>46</sup>

Mirecourt debates his Benedictine *socius* throughout his four *principia*, and the heart of their disagreement is linked to the subject of this volume, making Mirecourt's *principia* – totalling about 80 modern pages without sermons and *apparatus* – in part a small treatise on the conditions in which one would renounce life. The debate slowly grows in intensity over the course of the academic year, gradually building to a crescendo. In the first *principium*, where we encounter the name Jean le Norman, the focus is on whether morally good acts can be performed outside a state of grace. While dealing with acts done *extra caritatem*, Mirecourt brings up death, remarking that death and non-existence are preferable to living in misery, for example in physical pain.<sup>47</sup> Jean de Blesis had taken the opposite position, that life should be chosen even when it is just a long series of pains, employing the traditional passages from book III of Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*. Although in some ways Mirecourt thus adopts the parallel position to that of Holcot, and Blesis follows the line of Chitterne, the Mirecourt-Blesis monastic debate at Paris departs from the confines of the Holcot-Chitterne mendicant exchange at Oxford, both topically and methodologically.

The Cistercian's attack aims at taking the Benedictine's position to the limits. Jean de Blesis maintains that death and non-existence are more abhorrent – *magis fugibile* – than life with suffering in misery. Mirecourt contends that this contradicts Aristotle's *Ethics*. For Mirecourt, although philosophers did not believe in an afterlife, they chose to live in accordance with right reason (*recta ratione*). On the question of life and existence, right reason in philosophy dictates, according to book IX of Aristotle's *Ethics*, that one should

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<sup>46</sup> For sources and discussion, see SCHABEL, "The Genre Matures."

<sup>47</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. M. BRÎNZEI – C. SCHABEL, forthcoming (§73): "Contra tres primas conclusiones venerabilis socii, arguo quod citius deberet aliquis eligere non esse quam miserum esse miseria paenae et sensus, vel miseria paenae vel sensus, cuius oppositum dicunt conclusiones praedictae."

prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long one without. From Aristotle Mirecourt derives a quantitative claim: one year of the good life is preferable to many years in prison.<sup>48</sup> The ratio of one year to many is the point of departure for a long mathematical digression on why a shorter but intensely pleasurable life is preferable to a longer and painful one.

Mirecourt insists on the absurdity of his *socius*' conclusion: "Socrates should choose living in punishment and in prison for 100 years and one hour over having maximum delight and intense joy for just 100 years." Between the two choices, *A* being pleasure for 100 years and *B* being pain for 100 years and one hour, Mirecourt affirms that it would be better to trade one hour of non-existence for the century of pleasure. This option of non-existence for one hour is inconceivable for Blesis, who has to conclude that "therefore joy *A* for 100 years and non-existence for one hour is more abhorrent (*plus fugibile*) than pain *B* for 100 years and one hour."<sup>49</sup>

Mirecourt presses the point mathematically, reducing the Benedictine's position *ad infinitum* until non-existence is preferable to physical pain, assuming that non-existence is finitely *fugibile* and therefore there is a fixed proportion of *fugibilitas* between non-existence and any particular pain: "Some pain of the senses can be twice as abhorrent than this fixed pain, and another three times, and so on to infinity, therefore some pain of the senses can be more abhorrent than non-existence is abhorrent."<sup>50</sup> Mirecourt claims

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<sup>48</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. BRÎNZEI – SCHABEL (§73–73.1): "Arguo primo sic: si non esse sit magis fugiendum quam aliqua miseria paenae, sequitur quod non ponendo vitam aliam post istam, sicut multi philosophi posuerunt, recta ratione habet magis debere quis eligere vivere quantumcumque paenaliter per maius tempus quam per minus tempus quantumcumque delectabiliter. Consequens est contra Philosophum, IX *Ethicorum*, capitulo 10, ubi dicit quod virtuosus per parvum tempus valde delectari magis eligeret quam multum remisse, et vivere bene per annum quam annos multos paenaliter in carcere."

<sup>49</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. BRÎNZEI – SCHABEL (§73.1.1): "Et quod hoc sequatur probro. Ex conclusionibus istis arguo quod Sortes habet eligere magis vivere paenaliter et in carcere vel alibi qualitercumque per centum annos et horam quam solum per centum annos in delectatione maxima vel maximo gaudio, quia, si non, sit *A* delectatio quam Sortes mallet eligere per solum centum annos quam vivere in *B* paena per centum annos et horam. Contra: aliqua est paena imaginabilis vel possibilis quae per unam horam tantum durans foret magis fugienda quam delectatio *A* per centum annos eligenda; et non-esse in eadem hora, iuxta positionem socii, foret magis fugiendum quam illa paena data durans tantum per unam horam fugienda; igitur non-esse per unam horam magis fugiendum est quam *A* delectatio durans per centum annos eligenda; igitur, data Sorti optione habere *A* gaudium per centos annos et non ultra vivere vel non habere et ultra vivere per horam, recta ratione debet eligere ultra vivere per horam et non habere *A* gaudium."

<sup>50</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. BRÎNZEI – SCHABEL (§74.2): "Sed probro consequentiam sic, quia, si non-esse sit tantum finite fugibile et certa paena sensus est etiam finite fugibilis, et in aliqua certa et finita proportione est non-esse magis fugiendum quam paena sensus, et aliqua paena sensus potest esse magis fugienda in duplo quam haec paena certa et alia in triplo et sic in infinitum, igitur aliqua paena sensus potest esse magis fugienda quam non-esse est fugiendum."

that one can imagine a pain so excruciating that, rather than endure it for just one hour, a person would rather live her entire life in great sadness just to avoid that horrible hour. Yet on Blesis' view, someone in his right mind should endure that excruciating pain for her entire life if it meant prolonging her life just for a tiny amount of time.<sup>51</sup>

Mirecourt also gives interesting 'philosophical' arguments of a non-temporal sort: in his right mind, Socrates would rather have his foot cut off than endure a certain level of pain, which Mirecourt calls *A*. But, according to Mirecourt, Socrates' overall existence is not infinitely more *eligibile* than his foot's existence, but only finitely so. Now, God could create a pain *B* proportionally worse (say 10.000:1) compared to *A* than Socrates' overall existence is more *eligibile* compared to that of his foot (say 1000:1). So if Socrates would rather lose his foot than endure pain *A*, then Socrates would rather lose his entire existence than endure pain *B*.<sup>52</sup> Mirecourt then gives the Pleasure Island analogy from Pinocchio. On the assumption that being human is in important ways infinitely better than being an animal, then a person should flee from being turned into a donkey even more than she should flee non-existence. Since God could punish the damned by changing her into a donkey, she should prefer non-existence, if given a choice.<sup>53</sup>

When Jean de Blesis defends choosing life under any of those circumstances, Mirecourt adduces three authoritative passages from Augustine, Bernard, and Bonaventure that seem to sympathize with his perspective. Throughout the first *principium*, Mirecourt thus seizes every occasion to defend choosing non-existence over life in misery, although toward the end of the question the Mirecourt-Blesis debate goes in a different direction when they add the element of sin.

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<sup>51</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. BRÎNZEI – SCHABEL (§73.1.2): “Confirmatur: aliqua est tanta paena imaginabilis et possibilis quod, citius quam homo sustineret illam per unam solam horam, vellet vivere per totum tempus vitae suae in magna tristitia ad vitandam illam magnam penam per horam; et plus est vitandum non-esse per unam horam quam pati aliquam paenam temporalem sensus; igitur ad vitandum non-esse per unam horam haberet homo per totam vitam suam recta ratione pati quantumcumque maximam paenam ad prolongandum vitam suam per unam horam vel quantumcumque modicum tempus.”

<sup>52</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. BRÎNZEI – SCHABEL (§75): “Tertio arguo sic: Sortes recta ratione citius quam pateretur *A* paenam haberet eligere abscisionem sui pedis. Tunc arguo sic: totum esse Sortis non est in infinitum eligibilis quam esse sui pedis, igitur solum finite; et Deus potest facere aliquam paenam que in maiori proportione est magis fugibilis quam *A* paena et quam esse Sortis sit magis eligibile quam esse pedis sui; igitur illa paena est magis fugibilis quam non-esse Sortis.”

<sup>53</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium I*, ed. BRÎNZEI – SCHABEL (§76–76.2): “Quarto sic: non minus haberet homo fugere mutari in asinum quam non-esse; sed per aliquam paenam damni posset homo mutari in asinum; igitur non minus haberet aliquis fugere paenam illam damni quam non-esse. Maior patet, quia infinite habet homo fugere mutari in asinum, alias esse hominis esset solum magis bonum quam esse asini in aliqua proportione. Minor patet, quia privet Deus hominem tanto excessu quanto excedit homo asinum, et sequitur propositum.”

Mirecourt concludes his first *principium* by saying that he will deal with other arguments of Jean de Blesis in book II and in some *lectiones*. Mirecourt's second *principium* asks about the possibility of creation, but he quickly abandons this discussion and reignites the confrontation with the same *socius* over their initial positions. The two *socii* attack each other for misinterpreting their statements, rehearsing what was said in the first *principium* and, in Mirecourt's case, also referring to what he taught in the previously advertised *lectiones* on book I. The doctrinal discussion in the second *principium* begins in the direction where the first *principium* left off, in the context of sin and punishment, but eventually, regarding damnation, Mirecourt states: "I do not believe that there would be a human of this world who would more quickly choose eternal misery over non-existence."<sup>54</sup>

Mathematics again comes to the fore. For Mirecourt, anyone should choose non-existence for a time in order to achieve a century of delight or to avoid a century of pain, but since his opponent thinks otherwise, Mirecourt imagines another scenario: suppose that in order to avoid *eternal* pain one had to choose non-existence for a certain time. Obviously, Mirecourt thinks, the goodness of that person's existence for that time is not infinitely better than that pain is bad, so the person should choose the period of non-existence to avoid eternal pain. Although perhaps not really applicable here, Mirecourt asserts that a martyr dying for Christ would likewise choose to have per head chopped off rather than be flayed alive, since it is a quicker death, with less pain. But Mirecourt knows his venerable *socius* Jean de Blesis disagrees, and the Cistercian quotes the Benedictine's words verbatim, twice:

*Blesis*: I take Socrates living [in pain] for 100 years and an hour, and let this be *A*, and on the other hand [I take] Socrates living for only 100 years in the greatest delight and not existing for an hour, and let this be *B*. *A* is less *fugibile* than *B*, because the hour of non-existence that *B* includes is more *fugibile* than all the pain that *A* includes. Furthermore, *A* has more of the good, namely that existence for an

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<sup>54</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium II*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 153va: "nec credo tamen quod sit aliquis homo mundi qui citius eligeret miseriam aeternam quam non esse."

hour, which is better than that accident that is the delight that *B* has beyond *A*, and consequently *A* is less *fugibile*.<sup>55</sup>

That is, for the Benedictine, it is better to live a horrible century and an hour than a really pleasant century. The two monks understand each other, but disagree completely.

Mirecourt repeats ideas from the first *principium*, but not until the second *principium* does the concept of annihilation appear. In his second *principium*, Jean de Blesis made an analogy between bodily death and temporal pains or punishments in this life, on the one hand, and annihilation and the pains or punishments of the next life, maintaining that just as no one should choose death in this life to avoid bodily pain – because, according to Aristotle in book III of the *Ethics*, death is the most terrible thing in this life – therefore no one should choose annihilation in the next life to avoid postmortem punishment.<sup>56</sup> Mirecourt admits that death is the greatest pain than anyone can undergo naturally in this life, but he denies that this entails that non-existence is more *fugibile* than any pain of the senses or of the damned. After all, non-existence includes no pain. Even so, if a human could endure more pain than death, then she would choose the pain of death rather than

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<sup>55</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium II*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, ff. 153vb–154ra: “Ex istis sequitur ista: quod aliquis haberet eligere non-esse per aliquod certum tempus pro aliqua delectatione habenda per C annos vel paena vitanda per C annos. Patet, quia si pro paena aeterna vitanda haberet eligere non-esse per aliquod tempus, sequitur quod suum esse non est sibi in infinitum melius quam illa paena mala vel delectatio bona. Secundo, quia velit aliquis mori pro Christo et ponatur in operatione sua. Eligat decapitationem vel excoriationem. Talis si excorietur, durabit diutius. Si decapitatur, statim morietur. Et tamen rationabiliter potest eligere decapitationem propter fugam paenae. Igitur pro aliqua paena vitanda habet aliquis eligere non-esse per aliquod certum tempus, cuius oppositum concedit venerabilis socius. Ad argumentum venerabilis socii, per quod ipse probavit oppositum, respondeo. Quando dicit: ‘Cipio Sortem vivere per C annos et horam, et sit *a*, et ex alia parte Sortem vivere solum per C annos in maxima delectatione et non-esse per horam, et sit *b*’, admitto. Et quando arguit: ‘*a* includit minus de fugibili quam *b*’, nego istam. Ad propositum, quando dicit: ‘quia non esse per horam quod *b* includit est magis fugibile quam tota paena quam *a* includit’, nego istud, cum reverentia, immo dico quod illa paena per C annos est magis fugibilis quam non esse per horam.” The more complete argument is above at f. 151vb: “Et probavit sic: ‘Cipio Sortem vivere paenaliter per C annos et horam, et sit *a*, et ex alia parte Sortem vivere solum per C annos in maxima delectatione et non-esse per horam, et sit *b*. Tunc arguo sic’, dicit ipse: ‘*a* includit minus de fugibili quam *b*, quia non-esse per horam quod *b* includit est magis fugibile quam tota paena quam *a* includit. Et iterum, plus habet de bono, puta ipsum esse per horam, quod est melius quam illud accidens quod est delectatio quod *b* includit ultra *a*, et per consequens *a* est minus fugibile.’”

<sup>56</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium II*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, ff. 151vb–152ra: “Tertia, argumenta venerabilis socii non probant mihi quin necessitatus ad eligendum non-esse vel miserum esse modo praedicto haberet eligere non-esse et fugere miserum esse miseria tali. Argumentum suum fuit istud: sicut se habet mors corporalis ad paenas temporales in hac vita, sic se haberent adnihilatio, si contingeret, ad paenas in vita alia; sed mors corporalis in vita ista numquam est eligenda ad vitandum quantumcumque paenam temporalem, quia per Aristotelem, III *Ethicorum*, capitulo 13, terribilissimum in hac vita est mors.”

that greater pain.<sup>57</sup> The rich discussion again turns to sin and the neo-Platonic elements we saw in the Holcot–Chitterne debate.

Mirecourt’s third *principium*, *Utrum mors Christi vel incarnatio fuerit pretium sufficiens pro peccato*, contains death in the very title and recalls the topic of Holcot’s book IV, question 7, where his debate with Chitterne first appears. Unlike Chitterne, who refused to accept choosing non-existence even to avoid mortal sin, Blesis at least makes that one exception, and Mirecourt relishes in claiming that Benedictine’s position thus amounts to labelling Christ’s sacrifice and that of all martyrs erroneous and unjust, unable to compensate for any sin. Mirecourt responds by insisting that the example of Christ’s sacrifice is proof that choosing non-existence for a short period of time is justified. Blesis replies with the distinction between death and non-existence/annihilation, and Mirecourt happily notes that he has forced Blesis to change his terms, a victory in the principal game, in which each side tries to trip the other up.

Nevertheless, Mirecourt thinks nothing of Blesis’ revision and further develops the distinction between non-existence *per mortem* and non-existence *per annihilationem*. Here the debate again moves in new direction, since it is assumed for the sake of argument that the choice of death or non-existence is given putting aside any question of sin and taking it for granted that there is an afterlife. Responding to his *socius*, Mirecourt introduces the example of Socrates’ death: “I posit that Socrates dies, and I posit that the body that was Socrates’ body does not improve when he is dead, nor does the soul that was his soul improve.”<sup>58</sup> With these suppositions, death and temporary annihilation do not differ, because if death is chosen on account of a future good, total annihilation can be equally chosen for the same reason. This can be shown mathematically: if death for a time is chosen for a future good in degree *A*, then we can increase the degree of goodness

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<sup>57</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium II*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 152ra: “Ad istud argumentum dico quod, quamvis mors sit magis fugibilis quam aliqua paena de facto <quam> in statu vitae praesentis posset aliquis naturaliter tolerare, et propter hoc ait Philosophus quod terribilissimum omnium mors est, ex hoc non sequitur quod non-esse sit magis fugibile quam quaecumque paena sensus vel damni. Quia mors est maior paena vel maiorem paenam naturaliter includit quam alia paena quam homo potest in hac vita naturaliter pati, ideo dicit Aristoteles quod mors est magis fugienda quam alia paena sensus. Non-esse vero formaliter nullam paenam includit. Sed si homo pati potest omnem paenam possibilem in certa specie, non obstante quod non moreretur et alia foret paena certae intensionis quam si pateretur moreretur, tunc potest dici quod haberet potius eligere minorem paenam, illam scilicet qua moreretur, quam omnem aliam paenam possibilem.”

<sup>58</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium III*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 254va: “Tertio, ad idem pono quod Sortes moriatur, et pono quod corpus quod fuit corpus Sortis non melioretur in aliqui ipso existenti mortuo, nec anima quae fuit eius animae moreretur.”

of that good to such a point where eventually annihilation for a time must be chosen as well.<sup>59</sup>

Trying to show that there is no essential difference between the two ways of non-being, assuming that both are temporary, chosen for the sake of a future good, Mirecourt asks the following question: “Is non-existence through annihilation unproportionally worse than non-existence through death, or proportionally worse?” If annihilation is proportionally worse, then as soon as we establish that proportion, we can correspondingly increase the goodness of the future good obtained via annihilation until death and annihilation become equal choices. If annihilation is unproportionally worse, then Mirecourt asserts rather weakly that an unproportionally better good can be posited.<sup>60</sup> In the end, Mirecourt maintains that Blesis’ distinction between death and temporary annihilation gains nothing.

The climax of the confrontation between the two *socii* is in the fourth *Principium*, when, after briefly announcing the topic of the efficacy of the sacraments, Mirecourt introduces a *dubium* that takes up more than 80% of the remainder of the text, returning to the topic of voluntary death. Mirecourt begins the *dubium* on a personal note, describing as a reporter the development of the debate, an interesting testimony to the rules of the *principia* game:

This is clear via my venerable *socius*, who posited six conclusiones on this matter in his third *principium*, and he proved it with certain arguments. I argued against these conclusions in my third *principium* through 16 main means. He has responded to these arguments in his fourth *principium*. Without doubt, none of my arguments

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<sup>59</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium III*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 254vb: “Quarto sic: non-esse per adnihilationem aut est improportionabiliter maius malum quam non-esse per mortem aut proportionabiliter maius malum. Si proportionabiliter maius malum, sit igitur in duplo maius malum. Tunc arguo sic: non-esse per mortem est praecise sicut duplum malum ad non-esse per adnihilationem; sed non-esse per mortem eliciendum per tempus pro tanto bono futuro; igitur non-esse per adnihilationem quod non est nisi duplum malum praecise est eliciendum per tempus pro bono duplo vel quadruplo futuro, et per consequens sicut non-esse mortis est eliciendum propter futurum bonum, ita non-esse adnihilationis.

<sup>60</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium III*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 254vb: “Si dicatur quod non-esse per adnihilationem improportionabiliter est maius malum quam non-esse per mortem, tunc arguitur sic: non-esse per mortem est eliciendum pro tanto bono futuro; cum igitur contingat apparere bonum aliud improportionabiliter maius bonum quam hoc, propter illud bonum potest recte eligere non-esse per adnihilationem, quod est improportionabiliter maius malum quam non-esse per mortem. Patet consequentia, quia sicut unum est improportionabiliter magis malum alio, sic est improportionabiliter unum bonum magis bonum altero.”

appears to have been solved – and I speak with all due respect – and I would willingly have replied to the solutions given, but because the venerable *socius* does not have another *principium* to do, he wrote me that I should not reply further so that he would not have to work again for the solutions to the arguments. And so, acquiescing to him, for now I propose merely to solve his arguments with which he proved the aforesaid six conclusions in his third *principium*. It is true that I have not dealt with this material on purpose except for arguing against him until now, but it is my intention to treat the root of this difficulty continuously until the end of the *lectura*.<sup>61</sup>

We can clearly see how eager Mirecourt was to attack his *socius*' position and to defend his own stance, and even his venerable *socius*' fatigue did not deter him completely. What follows in the fourth *principium* is precious, because Mirecourt quotes explicitly long passages from Jean de Bles' six conclusions, allowing us to reconstruct some fragments of the Benedictine's lost *principium* and to better discern his doctrinal profile.

For Blesis, life is the supreme good, surpassing in goodness the badness of anything that is bad, so one simply should not choose non-existence to escape pain or punishment. For a human being, non-existence is thus more abhorrent (*magis fugibile*) than existence with the complete absence of all delight. Responding to Mirecourt's Pinocchio example, our Benedictine introduces a different syllogism with new premises in which *esse asinum* is the middle term (M):

P1 (M) being a donkey without any pain at all is *magis fugibile* than being a human with any pain whatsoever

P2 not being a human is *magis fugibile* than (M) being a donkey without any pain at all

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<sup>61</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium IV*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 292ra: "Illud patet per venerabilem socium, qui de illa materia posuit 6 conclusiones in suo tertio principio et probavit per certas rationes. Contra conclusiones illas arguebam in tertio principio meo et per 16 media principalia. Ad quae argumenta respondit in suo quarto principio. Sine dubio nullum argumentum meum videtur mihi – cum reverentia loquor – esse solutum, et libenter contra solutiones datas replicassem. Sed ex hoc venerabilis socius non habet aliud principium facere, scripsit mihi quod non plus replicarem ne pro solutionibus argumentorum haberet iterato laborare. Et ideo, acquiescendo sibi, propono pro nunc solum solvere rationes suas per quas in tertio principio suo probavit 6 conclusiones praedictas. Verum est quod materiam istam non tractavi a proposito nisi solum contra ipsum arguendo usque nunc. Sed intentionis meae est tractare radicem istius difficultatis continue usque ad finem lecturae."



•. not being a human is *magis fugibile* than being a human with any pain whatsoever<sup>62</sup>

Blesis also twists Mirecourt's mathematical approach against him, claiming that if one should choose non-existence for a period to avoid a certain amount of time with pain, for example one hour of non-existence to avoid a century of pain at level *B*, then one could proportionally increase the level of pain to the point where one hour of non-existence would compensate for precisely one hour of that increased pain, which the Benedictine clearly thinks is absurd. Likewise, if one hour of non-existence is needed for a century of delight, why not say that two hours of non-existence are needed for four years of delight, and so on *in infinitum*?<sup>63</sup>

Mirecourt denies the donkey premises, but he accepts Blesis' absurdities, even saying that one hour of pain could be made so intense that avoiding it would be worth many hours of non-existence, and he grants that one can never fix any finite amount of time without also conceiving of a delight so great that non-existence for that time would be worth that delight.<sup>64</sup> The discussion goes on and on, with Mirecourt constantly repeating his assertion that we can renounce life in the face of misery or to escape pain or punishment, since confronted with pain we all react differently, and some pains can be more intense for sensitive natures, the *delicati*, than for stronger humans: *una paena plus flagebat unam naturam quam aliam*. Again and again, Mirecourt reiterates that the prospect of a future life full of delight can motivate one to renounce one's current existence.

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<sup>62</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium IV*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, f. 292va: "Tertio arguit sic: esse asinum sine quacumque paena est magis fugibile quam esse hominem cum quacumque paena; sed non esse hominem est magis fugibile quam esse asinum sine quacumque paena; igitur non esse est magis fugibile quam esse hominem cum quacumque paena."

<sup>63</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium IV*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, ff. 293ra-va: "Secundo arguit sic: quia si non-esse per tempus est eligendum ad vitandum paenam per tempus, sit igitur quod non-esse per horam ad vitandum *b* paenam *C* annorum. Consequentia apparet per proportionem quod deveniri potest ad aliquam paenam durantem [293rb] praecise per eandem horam quae est ita mala sicut *b* paena, igitur ad vitandum paenam illam per horam esset non-esse eligendum per eandem horam... Secundo arguit: si non esse etc., sit igitur quod non esse per horam sit eligendum pro tali delectatione futura *C* annorum. Tunc eadem ratione non esse per duas horas pro delectatione quatuor [293va] annorum, et sic in infinitum, igitur non esse per quodcumque tempus esset eligendum pro quacumque delectatione habenda per tempus."

<sup>64</sup> IOHANNES DE MERCURIA, *Principium IV*, Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibliothek 148, ff. 293rb-va: "Ad illud concedo conclusionem, quia credo illam esse veram. Unde aliqua paena posset imaginari tanta quia illa vitanda per horam haberet aliquis eligere <non->esse per horam, immo per multas horas... Ad illud, dico quod, si totum eligibile intendatur, concedo quod per duas horas habet eligere non-esse et per quatuor, et sic ultra concedo quod numquam dabitur tempus aliquod finitum quin aliqua delectatio potest esse ita magna quod propter illam aliquis potest rationabiliter eligere non-esse per illud tempus. Nec oppositum probat ratio sua."

The principal debate between the Cistercian Mirecourt and the Benedictine Blesis, like the *replicationes* of the Dominican Holcot and the Franciscan Chitterne, contains a wealth of information on how Christian theologians viewed voluntary death. For the most part, to the extent that it was possible, we have limited our discussion to the philosophical issue. With his emphasis on the mathematics of degrees and his interesting examples in support of death over pain in certain circumstances, Mirecourt produces an original contribution to the philosophical tradition on this topic, inspiring a junior confrère.

### 3. Pierre Ceffons OCist vs. Jean Charel d'Aubepierre, 1348–49

Of the 40 or so surviving sets of *principia* that we have identified from the fourteenth century so far, Pierre Ceffons' are extraordinary, which is not surprising for this extraordinary author.<sup>65</sup> The sermons and questions, extant in just one witness, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, will require about 300 modern pages to print, so they are much larger than those of his confrère Jean de Mirecourt. Partly for fun, Ceffons defended the thesis that all things happen of necessity, sparking a debate over fatalism with all nine of his fellow bachelors reading the *Sentences* at Paris in the 1348–49 academic year, the year of the Black Death. Roughly 50 modern pages are devoted to debating the fourth *socius*, Jean Charel d'Aubepierre of the Collège de Navarre, who hailed from Ceffons' own region.

Ceffons cites his “special friend” and “compatriot” *Magister Iohannes de Alba Petra* on several occasions, remarking at one point that he was bachelor *in Navarra*. *Alba Petra* is Aubepierre, surely Aubepierre-sur-Aube in the diocese of Langres, now in Haute-Marne, is only a bit more than 50km from the village of Ceffonds, also in the same *département*. Jean Charel d'Aubepierre was a student of arts in the Collège de Navarre before 1342 and afterwards in theology, although he claimed to have studied canon and civil law as well. Aubepierre had trouble paying for the expenses of becoming master, however, and he was still bachelor of theology in 1353, when he took up duties as

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<sup>65</sup> For Ceffons' life and works, see C. SCHABEL, *Pierre Ceffons et le déterminisme radical au temps de la peste noire* (Conférences Pierre Abélard), Paris 2019, building on D. TRAPP, “Peter Ceffons of Clairvaux”, in *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 24 (1957), 101–54, and C. SCHABEL “*Lucifer princeps tenebrarum... The Epistola Luciferi and Other Correspondence of the Cistercian Pierre Ceffons* (fl. 1348–1353)”, in *Vivarium* 56 (2018), 126–75. For the *principia*, see SCHABEL, “The Genre Matures.”

chaplain of the college. He complained of his financial problems again in early 1355, but by early 1357 he had incepted as master of theology, ceasing his role as chaplain in 1359.<sup>66</sup>

Ceffons debates with this *socius* in each of the four *principia*. The dialogue begins in the first *principium* with Ceffons' reporting Jean d'Aubepierre's claim that, if Ceffons' thesis were true, that everything happens of necessity, "nothing would be evil," since evil comes from the human will. Yet Aubepierre went on to claim that a will is evil "because of nothing," because it is on account of injustice, which is itself nothing. We have seen that one side of the debate over voluntary death traditionally adopted a neo-Platonic stance based on Augustine, so, in order to give his *socii* fodder for argument, Ceffons interjects, he asserted that no lack *qua* lack is evil, so the root of evil is *not* nothing or negation. Apparently a master of theology had concluded that, "if no evils exist, evils exist," which conclusion, Ceffons relates, was rightly refuted that year in the Sorbonne, one assumes in the spring of 1348.

In his second *principium*, Jean d'Aubepierre took issue with Ceffons' "three propositions": that not all sin ("evil of fault") is pure privation, that not all evil of pain is pure privation, and that the evil of privation does not equal the good of which one is deprived. From these three tenets Aubepierre inferred four corollaries, the first of which recalls that of Jean de Blesis, Mirecourt's *socius*: nothing miserable, other than sin, is to be avoided more than non-existence; that is, any misery is preferable to non-existence, except if it is connected to sin, for example denying Christ, which is worse than death, according to the fourth corollary.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, for Aubepierre, the worst punishment or pain that God can inflict is annihilation, the privation of existence, but if that were something positive, it would not be annihilation.<sup>68</sup>

Ceffons pounced on Aubepierre's assertion that, except for sin, nothing is worse than non-existence. Supposing that God annihilated Socrates in this instant, where is the pain

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<sup>66</sup> See SCHABEL, "The Genre Matures", on Jean Charel d'Aubepierre. The discussion below partly summarizes and partly expands on the pertinent section of "The Genre Matures."

<sup>67</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium II*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 84ra–b: "Ex istis conclusionibus infert tria corollaria. Primum est quod nullum miserum esse miseria quae non est culpa est tam fugiendum quam fugiendum est non esse... [84rb]... Ex quo infertur quartum corollarium, quod fugibilis est negare Christum quam fugibilis fit mors corporalis <et> quam privatio totalis vitae."

<sup>68</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium II*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 84ra: "Secunda conclusio sua fuit ista: quod non solum malum culpae, sed etiam paenae, per se consistit in pura privatione... Et confirmat, nam sequitur quod Deus non potest infligere paenam adnihilationis. Consequens est falsum. Consequentiam probo, quia si in illo malo paenae esset aliquod positivum, non esset adnihilatio."

in that? Annihilation would either be a punishment for Socrates when he exists or when he has been annihilated, but obviously neither is the case. Thus annihilation is never pain or punishment for Socrates, especially when he is not forewarned.<sup>69</sup> For Ceffons, Aubepierre's position entails that it would be better to be in the hottest furnace for a time than not to exist for a fraction of a second, which is insane. Ceffons himself would prefer not existing for a day to being tortured forever. Philosophically, Ceffons goes on to suggest that annihilation is neither good nor bad, but he says he will continue the discussion in his third *principium* and in some *lectiones*, perhaps meaning his discussions of suicide and the death penalty in *dubia* in III *Sentences*, questions 5, 7, and 9, although the topic of mortal sin also occupies much space in book II.<sup>70</sup>

The fascinating discussion indeed continued in the third *principium*, where Ceffons quotes Jean d'Aubepierre verbatim for about 300 lines and then responds in over 400 lines, perhaps indicating that written texts were distributed before the oral debates. Much of this exchange continues the dispute over the ontological status of evil and sin, but death and annihilation appear again as well. For Aubepierre, everyone and everything seeks to exist and to remain in existence, so annihilation is a pain or punishment, but the bachelor of Navarre feels the need to bring in the pain of damnation, which is forever, since otherwise annihilation could be instantaneous. Even so, Aubepierre rejects Ceffons' argument about preferring non-existence or annihilation for a brief time rather than long suffering, because Aubepierre's focus is on an *infinite* time of non-existence. Aubepierre adds that it would be better to be a man in pain than to be a donkey, an example that

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<sup>69</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium II*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 84va: "Ad hoc dico quod, si Deus adnihilet Sortem in *a* instanti, non infert sibi aliquam paenam nec aliquod malum. Unde si adnihilat in hoc instanti, Sortes non est. Quomodo ergo ei est paena quod non est? Dico ergo arguendo contra istum patrem: vel adnihilatio esset paena Sortis quando Sortes est vel quando est iam adnihilatus. Nec sic nec sic, ut facile est deducere. Igitur. Ex hoc infero contra istum magistrum quod adnihilatio Sortis numquam est paena Sortis nec paenalis Sortis. Et hoc maxime in casu quod Sortes numquam de adnihilatione sua praecognoverit seu ordinaverit aut cogitaverit."

<sup>70</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium II*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 84vb: "Videtur mihi quod ex isto sequitur quod fugibilis est non-esse per horulam seu imperceptibilem quam esse per quodcumque tempus in ardentissima fornace, quod nullus sane mentis diceret. Mallet enim non-esse per unam diem quam perpetuo cruciari seu minus fugere non-esse per horulam quam etc. Deductus contra hoc inconueniens faciliter se offert. Et declarabo in tertio principio, si velit. Dico ulterius quod ex argumento suomet hoc deduceretur. Unde per argumentum suum probaretur quod magis fugibile est non-esse per diem quam esse in quacumque paena, et per quodcumque tempus voluerit. Deductionem sibi relinquo, aut alias explicabo, si velit. Hoc etiam in quibusdam lectionibus intendo declarare." Book III, questions 5, 7, and 9 are certainly worth a separate study on Ceffons and death: (5) *Utrum iudex sciens aliquem esse innocentem propter aliquas probationes aliorum debeat illum occidere seu ad mortem condemnare*; (7) *Utrum liceat iudici homines occidere seu ad mortem condemnare*; (9) *Utrum quodlibet peccatum sit malitiae infinitae*.

recalls, probably not by chance, Mirecourt's *principia*. Likewise, for Aubepierre, it would be better to be a man in greater pain than a mouse or a snake, and for an ant, a stone, and so on *in infinitum*.<sup>71</sup>

Ceffons reiterates his anti-neo-Platonic contention that annihilation is painless, whether for an instant or forever, and if God annihilated the whole world, nothing would suffer or be damned at all. How can there be pain if there is nothing? "I am really amazed that a non-entity is still pain, indeed, that Socrates' non-existence is still Socrates!"<sup>72</sup> Ceffons hammers this point home so vehemently and at such length that one is struck by the completely opposite views of the two *socii* on the subject, parallel to what one finds in modern arguments about death, between the two present writers, for example.

At this point the debate becomes more mathematical, demonstrating again the incorporation of limit language in theology, to which John Murdoch drew attention long

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<sup>71</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium III*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 188ra: "Et ex istis infero duo contra praedictum dominum Petrum: primum, quod adnihilatio est malum paenae, cuius oppositum probat pater reverendus sic: quia si esset malum paenae, vel in quo adnihilatur vel ante post, dico quod paena damni incipit esse in instanti, et paena sensus quae est adnihilatio est solum per instans. Sed paena damni semper erit... Secundo, quod non est idem esse adnihilatum per unum diem sicut per tempus infinitum, sicut non est idem bonum esse per unum diem sicut per infinitum. Igitur non sequitur quod si aliquis debeat plus fugere non-esse simpliciter quam esse et esse miserum quae non est culpa quod debet plus fugere non-esse per unum diem quam fugere esse miserum in miseria quae non est culpa per tempus infinitum. Nec video quod argumentum meum hoc deducat sicut supponit. Et idcirco probo sibi adhuc quod debeat plus fugere non-esse quam esse miserum in miseria quae non est culpa. Nam melius esset esse hominem pro aliqua paena quam esse asinum, et esse hominem cum maiori paena quam esse murem vel serpentem, et cum maiori quam esse formicam, et adhuc cum maiori quam esse lapidem, et sic procedendo in infinitum. Igitur in infinitum plus debet fugere non esse quam miserum in etc."

<sup>72</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium III*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 188vb: "Contra, quia ille qui adnihilatur in hoc instanti, puta in praesenti instanti, quod sit *a*, illud, inquam, numquam habebit damnus nec habet damnus, quia non est. Nam si esset, non adnihilaretur in *a* nunc. Et cum dicit quod perpetuo habebit damnus, hoc non videtur etc., quia si Deus adnihilaret totum mundum nihilque penitus remaneret nisi Deus, nullum esset damnus. Nam si Deus reduceret mundum ad statum in quo erat antequam mundus esset, ut sic loquar, quod damnus esset aut aliquis haberet damnus etc., loquor scienter a proprio vocando statum quod non est status nec esset etc. Sed dicit etiam quod paena sensus quae est adnihilatio est solum per instans. His potest argui, quia adnihilatio non videtur in illo instanti in quo Sortes adnihilatur esse ei paena sensus, quia non est paena sensus nisi sentiatur. Item, nullus habet paenam sensus nisi sentiat etc. Sed talis non sentit, quia nihil est, sed est adnihilatus in illo instanti, et sic non est. Quomodo pro illo instanti habet paenam sensus et praecise per instans illud habet paenam sensus etc.? Et quando ulterius inquirebam cui est adnihilatio paena et quando dicit quod paena rei dum est et quando est ei paena quod ipsa sit adnihilanda, sed saltem ex hoc habetur quod non est mala adnihilatio nisi quando ipsa non est, ne dicam contra ipsum quod ipsa non est mala nisi antequam sit per magnum temous, quomodo enim est tibi malum illud quod numquam erit malum et quando erit aliquo modo est paena aliquid antequam sit quod quando erit non erit paena. Miror multum quod non ens sit iam paena, immo quod non-esse Sortis sit Sortes, qui est paena est suum non-esse quod non est noceat ei etc., et quod a quando non est sit aliqui paena, et quando *a* erit tunc non erit paena. Item, concludendo quod esse et non esse sunt simul, nam Sortes est et et suum non-esse aut sua adnihilatio futura est ei paena et quando adnihilatio erit non erit paena, quia nulli esset paena, nisi dicere velimus quod non ens sustinet magnam paenam."

ago in other texts of Ceffons and other scholastics of the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Ceffons rejects Jean d'Aubepierre's response to the non-existence argument by reasoning that, according to Aubepierre's new way of speaking, it is better to bare any pain for an infinite amount of time than not to exist for an instant, an hour, or a day, "because it is better to be a man for a day with some pain than an ass for two days, and better to be a man for a day than a mouse for three days, and better to be a man for a day than a stone for five days, and so on to infinity, according to this father's understanding." The debate is long, but Ceffons' opinion is clear: "I say to the argument that the pain can be so great that it would be preferable to be a donkey or nothing at all than to be a man with that pain, so to speak. For it would be more abhorrent – *fugibilis* – to be a man with that pain than it is abhorrent not to exist."<sup>74</sup>

Jean d'Aubepierre reacts by falling back on the notion that sin has no positive existence, and Ceffons rehearses the earlier discussion concerning the ontological status of something lacking, a *caerentia*, as well as nothingness – *nihilitas* – and a *chimaera*. This lengthy exchange continued in the fourth *principium*, apparently, where it is hard to know whether one should interpret Ceffons' remarks about his *socius* as sincere or sarcastic, or both: "Concerning the statements of my compatriot and special friend master Jean d'Aubepierre... for the sake of the debate (*gratia collationis*) with my master, who certainly is an ingenious man, I argue..."<sup>75</sup> On annihilation, Aubepierre insists that pain is involved, at least in an instant. But Ceffons replies that one who does not exist does not feel with any sense, because there is no sense. Aubepierre claims this is true *in actu*, but it is enough that she existed immediately beforehand. To which Ceffons responds, "With

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<sup>73</sup> MURDOCH, "Mathesis in philosophiam scholasticam introducta" and "Subtilitates anglicanae in the Fourteenth Century."

<sup>74</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium III*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 188vb: "Ex isto, si convincat, arguo quod melius est habere quantamcumque paenam per quoddam tempus infinitum quam non-esse per instans vel per horulam seu per diem, quia melius est esse hominem per diem cum aliqua paena quam esse asinum per duos dies etc., et melius est esse hominem per diem quam esse murem per 3 dies, et melius est esse hominem per diem quam esse lapidem per 5, et sic procedendo in infinitum etc. ad intellectum huius patris... Dico ergo ad argumentum quod tanta esse posset paena quod eligibilis esset esse asinum aut nihil omnino quam hominem esse cum illa paena, ut sic loquar. Fugibilis enim esset esse hominem cum illa paena quam sit fugibile non esse."

<sup>75</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium IV*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 207va: "Circa dicta compatriotae mei et amici specialis magistri Iohannis de Alba Petra, est sciendum quod contra eum argueram non ponendo conclusionem etc., sicut ipse fideliter dixit. Sed nunc ut fortificat dicta sua ponit quod Deus habet <nolle>[velle] positivum circa deformitatem peccati. Sed gratia collationis cum magistro meo, qui pro certo ingeniosus homo est, arguo contra hoc..."

all due respect to the reverend master, in order to feel it is not enough to have existed immediately beforehand unless she exists now.”<sup>76</sup>

When Ceffons reiterates that annihilation is not pain, Ceffons and Aubepierre repeat the exchange between Mirecourt and Blesis on Aristotle’s view of the horrors of death, but Ceffons is more eloquent:

And when to this he brings up concerning death that it is the ultimate of terrible things and he thus concludes that it is enough for the person to have existed immediately beforehand in order to have pain now, I say that in death, before the soul is separated from the body, there are many agonies and horrors. And no one knows how it will be for her soul after death, and people are accustomed to suffering the greatest pains before the soul is separated from the body. Therefore, because these pains precede the separation of the soul from the body, some people say that this is the ultimate, although it is a condemned article of Paris that “death is the ultimate of terrible things – error.” *Si concludatur mors Gehennae, a qua praeservet nos Altissimus!*<sup>77</sup>

The fourth *principium* included the final round over the issue of whether non-existence is preferable to existence with any amount of suffering, putting aside the case of mortal sin. Aubepierre is uncomfortable with the supposed *absurdum* to which Ceffons has reduced his position, that no matter how intense the pain and no matter how long one would have to endure it, one should not choose temporary non-existence or annihilation even for a second. The bachelor of Navarre is unwilling to abandon his position, so he tries to get around the *absurdum*. Aubepierre denies that the soul has the capacity to undergo more and more pain indefinitely, but Ceffons notes that some would claim that

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<sup>76</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium IV*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 208rb: “Item, dicit quod paena sensus est in instanti. Sed contra, quia ille qui non est non sentit per aliquem sensum, unde sensus non est. Ergo dicit quod sic in actu, sed sufficit quod immediate ante fuerit. Salva gratia reverendi magistris, ad hoc quod sentiat non sufficit quod immediate ante fuerit nisi nunc sit.”

<sup>77</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium IV*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 208rb: “Et quando ad hic allegat de morte quod est ultimum terribilium et sic concludit quod sufficit quod immediate antefuerit ad hoc quod nunc habeat paenam, dico quod in morte, antequam anima separetur a corpore, sunt multi agones et horrores. Et nescit homo qualiter erit animae suae post mortem, et maximas paenas sustinere solent homines antequam separetur anima etc. Idcirco, quia illam separationem animae a corpore praecedunt haec, dixerunt aliqui quod ultimum etc. Quamvis sit articulus Parisius condemnatus ‘quod ultimum terribilium mors – error’. Si concludatur mors Gehennae, a qua praeservet nos Altissimus.”

this response limits God's power to punish. Aubepierre does not find it absurd for non-existence for a day to be more *fugibile* than a given pain, but Ceffons reiterates that any pain, say *G*, can simply be increased to the point where one would not only prefer non-existence for one day, but for two, three, or four days, and eventually any finite amount of time. Aubepierre admits that for him it is better to be a human in pain than a donkey and in ever more pain as the replacement decreases in perfection down to a stone and infinitely beyond, and he admits that it is incomparably better to endure an affliction forever than not to exist perpetually, but he refuses to accept that his position leads to the conclusion that, no matter how great the pain is, it is better to exist in that pain than not to exist, and no matter how brief the time of non-existence is, it is better to exist in that pain than not to exist:<sup>78</sup>

And proceeding thus *in infinitum* in time and in species and in pain in this master's way of arguing, it seems that it is incomparably better to be a human for a day and

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<sup>78</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium IV*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 208rb–va: “Tertio principaliter dixit quod fugibilis est non esse miserum quaque miseria paenae quae non est culpa. Ex his volo probare... Sed nulla potest dari paena per finitum tempus durativa quantumcumque magnum vel quantumcumque magna quin possit signari paena per diem praecise duratura aequae vel magis fugibilis. Illud ipse negat, quia evadit per capacitatem animae, quia alia paena est ultra capacitatem animae. Sed illud aliqui impugnant, nam anima potest peccare sine fine, et videtur quod ei Deus possit infligere paenam quantaecumque intensionis finitae, ut plures volunt, de quo tamen nihil determino pro nunc... Dicit secundo quod non repugnat pro inconvenienti fugibilis non esse per diem quam esset fugibilis aliqua paena, sed tanta poterit dari quod fugibilior esset paena. Signetur ergo illa, et sit gratia exempli sicut *g*. Tunc eligibilis est non esse per diem quam habere paenam *g*, et eadem via est eligibilis est non esse per duas dies quam habere duas tales paenas, aut quatuor tales, et eligibilis est non esse per tres quam habere etc. Tandem concludam quod pro vitatione paenae vel paenarum aliquis semper rationabiliter eliget non esse per quodcumque tempus finitum poterit eligere non esse rationabiliter pro fugienda certa paena, et sic consequenter quod eligibilis erit etc., contra hunc magistrum meum. Item, volendo probare etc. arguit sic: melius est esse hominem cum aliqua paena quam esse asinum sine paena et esse hominem cum maiori quam esse formicam etc., et adhuc cum maiori quam omne lapidem, et sic deducendo in infinitum etc. Ex hoc statim videri potest quod iste pater vult deducere quod non potest dari paena tantae intensionis in aliquo tempore quin melius esse illam habere quam non esse, seu etiam quam non esse per diem. Nam etiam secundum eum non esse in perpetuum est incomparabiliter peius quam quaecumque afflictio etiam in infinitum duratura. Ergo etiam non esse per diem erit incomparabiliter peius et fugibilis quam quaecumque paena finita. Nam si aequetur paenae finitae, deducetur contra istum: sicut etiam se habet non esse in perpetuum ad paenam perpetuam, sic se habet non esse per tempus ad paenam duraturam per tempus; sed non esse in perpetuum est incomparabiliter etc.; igitur et hic etc. Item, arguebam ex dicto eius. Unde et ex argumentis suis plane deducitur quod esse est incomparabiliter eligibilis quam sit fugibilis quaecumque paena. Patet per eius argumentum statim recitatum, et per alia de quibus taceo. Item, arguebam etc. Sed dicit quod non concludo nisi etc. Dico quod immo, conclusi quod incomparabiliter melius erat esse hominem per diem quam sit fugibilis quaecumque paena et incomparabiliter est melius esse hominem per diem quam habere aliud [208va] certum esse per tempus etc.”



any pain whatsoever is *fugibilis*, and I argued thus in the classroom (*scholis*). Although I did not correct what I sent him, in truth it is easy to see the intent.<sup>79</sup>

The debate between Ceffons and Jean d’Aubepierre, touching on issues such as the problem of evil and suicide, demonstrates the fascination of the principial genre as well as any other exchange in Ceffons’ *principia*. It also shows how the topics and positions of one principial debate circulated and were taken up again a few years later in another, perhaps even that the Cistercians prided themselves on their collective daring.

Did the issue of whether non-existence is preferable to a misery become a Cistercian topos in *principia*? We are fortunate to have traces of the *principia* of all fourteenth-century Cistercians whose questions on the *Sentences* survive: in addition to those of Mirecourt and Ceffons, we can reconstruct the Parisian *principia* of Jacob of Eltville from 1369–70 via the notes of his Franciscan *socius*, Jean of Regis, one of his *socii*, and we recently identified real fragments among anonymous questions in a Jena manuscript. Eltville deals only with the perfection of species and its infinite latitudes. Alexander Baumgarten, our colleague in Cluj-Napoca, recently discovered five burnt *folia* of Gottschalk of Nepomuk’s Parisian *principia* from 1367, but Baumgarten has yet to determine the main thesis. An interesting set of *principia* belongs to Conrad of Ebrach, from Bologna 1368–69, but they deal with ontological issues about being, causality, and necessity, never non-existence in terms of death. Thus only Ceffons followed Mirecourt in the discussion on suicide.<sup>80</sup>

Yet there was a brief discussion of the subject between two of Ceffons’ own *socii* in 1348–49, the Dominican Bartholomé d’Anizy, the eight bachelor to deliver his first *principium* that year, and the Augustinian Hugolino of Orvieto, the tenth and final

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<sup>79</sup> PETRUS DE CEFFONS, *Principium IV*, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac 62, f. 208va: “Unde si melius est esse hominem per diem cum paena quam esse asinum sine paena per duas dies, et melius sit esse hominem per diem cum maiori paena quam esse murem per tres dies sine paena, et adhuc melius sit esse hominem cum adhuc maiori paena per diem quam esse lapidem per quatuor dies et sine paena, et sic procedendo in infinitum in tempore in speciebus et in paena ad modum arguendi huius magistri, videtur quod incomparabiliter sit melius esse hominem per diem quam sit fugibilis quaecumque paena. Et sic argui ego in scholis, quamvis non correxerim illud quod ei misi, sed secundum veritatem facile est videre intentum.”

<sup>80</sup> See BRÎNZEI, “When Theologians Play Philosopher” (Eltville) and M. BRÎNZEI – C. SCHABEL, “Les Cisterciens de l’université. Le cas du commentaire des *Sentences* de Conrad d’Ebrach (†1399)”, in *Les Cisterciens et la transmission des textes (XII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. T. FALMAGNE – D. STUTZMANN – A.-M. TURCAN-VERKERK, with P. GANDIL (Bibliothèque d’histoire culturelle du Moyen Âge 18), Turnhout 2018, 453–86.

bachelor, whose *Sentences* questions have survived.<sup>81</sup> Responding to Bartholomé in his first *principium*, Hugolino asserted that miserable existence is worse than none at all.<sup>82</sup> Bartholomé replied in his second *principium* that even the unjust want to live well, and since living well entails existence, they choose existence over non-existence.<sup>83</sup> Probably inspired by the parallel debate between his Cistercian *socius* and the bachelor of the Collège de Navarre, Hugolino answered in his third *principium*, asking whether one would choose existing for a month without any of the elements of living well, like thinking, willing, feeling, enjoying, and so on, or living 29 wonderful days of delight without sin. Who would not choose the 29 great days over the 30 empty ones?<sup>84</sup> Taking the side of William Chitterne, Jean de Blesis, and Jean d'Aubepierre, Bartholomé had claimed that even those who are miserable desire to exist more than to exist well, adding a strange proof: "Given a line that the imagination has composed of existing and existing well, its first portion would be existing, since 'the first of created things is being', according to the author of *De causis*."<sup>85</sup> Hugolino thinks that this is simply false, using Bartholomé's own words, for the Dominican had said that non-existence is only finitely *fugibile* and infinite pain would be *fugibilis*.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>81</sup> On Bartholomé and this exchange, summarized here, see SCHABEL, "The Genre Matures."

<sup>82</sup> HUGOLINUS DE URBE VETERI, *Principium I* a.2, ed. ECKERMANN, vol. 1, 19.31–36: "Unde posset dari tam odibile male esse quod magis fugeret quam eligeret suum esse. Ex quo sequitur quod corollarium bachalarii Praedicatorum non est verum quo dixit quod iniustus magis eligit esse quam fugiat damnationem. Nam ideo praecise diligit esse quia diligit commodum vel voluptuose esse, ut dixit."

<sup>83</sup> HUGOLINUS DE URBE VETERI, *Principium III* a.2, ed. ECKERMANN, vol. 4, 6.105–08: "Quantum ad hoc dubium excludo responsionem quam in secundo principio suo fecit ad dicta mea bachalarius Praedicatorum. Nam totum solvit per hoc: 'Quia bene esse claudit esse, ideo quid mirum si est eligibilis'."

<sup>84</sup> HUGOLINUS DE URBE VETERI, *Principium III* a.2, ed. ECKERMANN, vol. 4, 6.121–26: "Contingit dare aliquod bene esse eligibilis ab homine quam suum purum esse. Probatur assumptis tribus propositionibus. Prima est: Purum esse hominis est finitae eligibilitatis. Hanc ipse posuit in eadem responsione, quinimmo dat probationem, quia non esse est finite fugibile et quam eligibile est esse quam fugibile est non esse; igitur."

<sup>85</sup> HUGOLINUS DE URBE VETERI, *Principium III* a.2, ed. ECKERMANN, vol. 4, 7.140–45: "Contra propositionem praedictam est ratio eius in eadem responsione sic: Appetitus tam miserorum quam aliorum est de per se et directo propter esse magis quam propter bene esse; igitur est magis eligibile. Consequentia evidens. Sed antecedens declarat, quoniam inquit: 'Data linea composita per imaginationem ex esse et bene esse, prima portio eius esset esse, cum *rerum creatarum prima sit esse*, per auctorem *De causis*.'"

<sup>86</sup> HUGOLINUS DE URBE VETERI, *Principium III* a.2, ed. ECKERMANN, vol. 4, 7-8.159–61: "Contingit dare miserum esse fugibilis quam perdere purum esse. Probatur primo ex dictis eius, quia non esse est finitae fugibilitatis et poena infinita, si foret, inquit ipse, esse fugibilior..."

So, “Is pain better than the grave?” Interpreting *principia* is dangerous, because the genre provided an opportunity to defend theses while protesting that one did not really believe what one was asserting. This is what Ceffons did explicitly when claiming that all things happened of necessity, and it may have been what Nicholas of Autrecourt did when discussing causation and certitude in his *principia* in the 1330s. It could be that Holcot and Chitterne, Mirecourt and Blesis, and Ceffons and Aubepierre were required to find issues on which they could take sides, for the sake of the disputation, as we read in the *principia* of many fourteenth-century theologians. The issue of willing or choosing death or annihilation thus came to be, for a time, a popular topic in the *principia* and other opportunities for *replicationes*, with set positions to defend.

On the other hand, it was dangerous to defend unorthodox theses, so perhaps the genre allowed bachelors of theology to express their true thoughts safely. At the turn of the present millennium, there was a debate over whether there was academic freedom at the medieval university, whether censorship had any real effect, with Alain Boureau claiming that it did not and Luca Bianchi begging to differ.<sup>87</sup> In 2020, it is hard not to think that Bianchi was right: academic freedom is in retreat in too many ‘enlightened’ places for us to imagine that Jean de Mirecourt and Pierre Ceffons were not deeply affected, in one way or another, by fear.

Ceffons constantly claimed that Oxford was safer and more free than Paris. From the relative safety of Oxford, Robert Holcot boldly imagined a Christian context in which God offered a trade of temporary annihilation for salvation – which a die-hard neo-Platonist would have to reject, taking her chances with eternal damnation, because more existence is better than less existence, no matter what the conditions. In Paris, Mirecourt too considered a scenario in which one could be annihilated and still achieve beatitude. Indeed, Mirecourt can be read as supporting euthanasia, but his ‘philosophical’ conception of death involves a passage to a future life of delight. Mirecourt supports temporary non-existence, either through death or annihilation, on the condition that no sin is involved, which seems to rule out suicide. Sin put aside, death or annihilation for a time leads to the greatest future good, proximity to God. More cautious than Mirecourt, many of whose alleged theses were condemned, Ceffons appears less eager to defend a

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<sup>87</sup> A. BOUREAU, “La censure dans les universités médiévales (note critique)”, in *Annales HSS* 55.2 (2000), 313–23; L. BIANCHI, “Un Moyen Âge sans censure? Réponse à Alain Boureau”, in *Annales HSS* 57.3 (2002), 733–43; A. BOUREAU, “Dialogue avec Luca Bianchi”, in *Annales HSS* 57.3 (2002), 745–49.

radical position on choosing non-existence over a miserable life in a theological context. Instead, adopting a *persona philosophi*, Ceffons repeatedly reminds his *socius* from the Collège de Navarre that what does not exist feels no pain, what is truly annihilated suffers no damnation. In the path to non-existence, the pain of death or annihilation, if there were any, would be instantaneous. For some time, then, Ceffons keeps the discussion on a philosophical level, an allegedly hypothetical level, with no afterlife, on which choosing death means a simple calculation that one misery outweighs whatever good there is in existence.

Yet Ceffons' caution is thinly disguised, and his famous criticism of censorship frequent, open, and sarcastic. Holcot seems not to have suffered, Mirecourt became abbot of Royaumont, and even Autrecourt, whose writings were destroyed, became dean of Metz, one of the wealthiest sees in Europe. Ceffons could complain about foreign witches censoring Mirecourt, but Ceffons could also write the person in charge of the papal condemnation of Autrecourt, the Cistercian theologian Guillaume Court, the White Cardinal, obsequiously begging the cardinal for money to finish the church of the Bernardins in Paris. Cardinal Court condemned articles from Mirecourt's writings, but he did not object to his junior confrère's becoming abbot. Thus the discussion of voluntary death in Oxonian *replicationes* and Parisian *principia* remained a conversation in the ivory tower. Of course, when Spiritual Franciscans showed up in Avignon seeking an actual voluntary death, the same White Cardinal obliged.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> On Guillaume Court, see R. Lützelshwab, "Cardinalis albus: On the Career of the Cistercian Monk Guillaume Court (†1361)", in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 45 (2010), 141–67. For his involvement in the affairs of Autrecourt and the Spiritual Franciscans, see Z. KALUZA, *Nicolas d'Autrecourt. Ami de la vérité* (Histoire littéraire de la France 42), Paris 1995, 98–105, 115–27, and 207–12, and A. PATSCHOVSKY, ed., *Ein kurialer Ketzerprozess in Avignon (1354). Die Verurteilung der Franziskanerspiritualen Giovanni di Castiglione und Francesco d'Arquata* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica Studien und Texte 64). Wiesbaden 2018, for which we used the summary in the online review by D. BURR, *The Medieval Review*, 28 September 2019. For Ceffons, the White Cardinal, and the Bernardins, Michalis Olympios and Chris Schabel are currently working on an article. For the relative wealth of Metz, see H. HOBERG, *Taxae pro communibus servitiis ex libris obligationum ab anno 1295 usque ad annum 1455 confectis* (Studi e testi 144), Città del Vaticano 1949, 374: in the mid-fourteenth century the bishop of Metz was taxed at the 18th highest rate among the over 800 Latin bishops and archbishops of Europe and the Latin East.