# 23

## *The* Umanista*'s Rival: Scholasticism*

If we had had a time machine and asked someone in 1450 to define what the *umanisti* were doing, there's one answer we're pretty confident they'd give: *not scholasticism*.

*Scholasticism* was the new, hot, sexy, cutting-edge innovation that dominated late medieval education, and would continue to dominate schools and universities through the Renaissance and beyond.[36] The proto-version of the scholastic method (the scholastic before there were scholastics, as Petrarch was a Renaissance classicizer before there was Renaissance classicism) we locate in passionate theologian-statesman Saint Anselm of Canterbury, or of Aosta, or of Bec (1033–1109; everyone wants to claim him, so different people call him after the place where he spent time in *their* country). After Anselm, scholasticism was popularized by intellectual mega-rockstar Peter Abelard (*c*.1079–1142), and polished to a high art by subtle Duns Scotus (*c*.1266–1308), tricksy William of Ockham (1287–1347), and all-time world theology boxing champion Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). The new scholastic method was *so exciting!* that when Peter Abelard got kicked out of his monastery (for proving its founding saint didn't exist—that pissed off the abbot, who'd have guessed?) and went to live as a hermit in the wilderness of Champagne, 100,000 people flocked there to form a tent city and listen to him teach. Abelard's crowd wasn't bigger than Woodstock but it was *twice the size of Paris* at the time, ample to make France fear that crowd + superstar preacher => private army? Later, when Thomas Aquinas was up for sainthood, his advocates argued that every single chapter in his *Summa Theologica* should be considered an individual miracle, and the judges agreed. (It's official folks, 3,000+ miracles in one compact paperback, only $12.99! Unless you want to buy it in the period, in which case it's $650,000; you don't get scholarship before the printing press unless wealthy elites believe it's really, really worth the $$$!)

What was so exciting? Scholasticism is going to sound really boring for the first paragraph, but will turn out to be the antidote to… certain death!

The seven liberal arts (*artes liberales*) were already well established by the days of Boethius (500 CE), and divided studies into the *trivium*—grammar, logic, and rhetoric, i.e. stuff that uses words—and the *quadrivium*—music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy/astrology, i.e. stuff that uses math. Scholasticism taught the *trivium*, but made *logic* queen, especially very technical chains of dialectical reasoning. Do you remember, in geometry class, when you had to write out a tedious thirty-two-step proof that the angles of a triangle had the ratio that you already knew from the start they had, so why bother? This is that method, but used for constructing thirty-two-step proofs that mercy is good, that truth is superior to ignorance, or that the universe exists. Scholasticism based its methods on one of the most influential books in world history: Aristotle's *Organon* (*The Instrument*), a collection of Aristotle's works on logic, consisting of (at its largest) the *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *On Sophistical Refutations*. The *Categories* and *On Interpretation* were the most influential, and had been available throughout the Middle Ages in the Latin translation by Boethius, while other bits hit Europe later via manuscripts brought from Constantinople, like the *Posterior Analytics* translated by James of Venice in the mid-1100s. As you have likely heard, Aristotle had a lot of very important ideas about political thought, forms of government, ethics, law, the famous "golden mean," empiricism, animal taxonomy, how to refute Plato's insistence on immaterial *ideas*, the three parts of the soul and their balance, etc. *The* Organon *was not any of those things*. It was a manual for constructing meticulous multi-step proofs out of chains of syllogisms, thus:

- All animals are mortal. All humans are animals. Therefore, all humans are mortal.
- All humans are mortal. Socrates is a human. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.
- All mortal things change. Socrates is mortal. Therefore, Socrates changes.
- All things that change dwell below the celestial sphere of the Moon. Socrates changes. Therefore, Socrates does not live in outer space.

A real scholastic syllogism would've had a whole chapter carefully defining each of these terms (animal, mortal, change, superlunary vs. sublunary, etc.) and meticulously establishing how we know that all mortal things change, and that all things that change dwell below the sphere of the Moon, etc. (everything above that just goes in eternal circles, haven't you looked up?!).

Aristotle used this kind of logic, and very painstaking definitions of terms, as a way to reduce error and

confusion in communication. He believed that most confusion in philosophy (and indeed in life) was caused by ambiguous terms:

- "Pass me my sweater." "Here you go." "No, the sweater! That's a cardigan!"
- "No fishing in the sanctuary." "I've caught an octopus!" "An octopus is a fish." "No it isn't!"
- "Was the court's sentence just?" "Yes, because the person was guilty." "No, because the sentence was too severe!" "What makes a sentence just anyway?"
- "A thing cannot both exist and not exist at the same time." "Aha, what about a doughnut hole!" "That's just a misleading name for a small spherical doughnut, it's not actually the same thing as the hole in a doughnut." "But it's called a doughnut hole!"

Aristotle (who would have had no patience with doughnut holes) believed that if one developed a very clear technical vocabulary, in which each term was defined using a combination of empirical observation and chains of patient syllogisms (Is justice the absolute prevention of harm, or a balancing of harms to minimize harm? What is harm?) then a lot of philosophical questions, as well as legal and political questions, could be discussed clearly, with everyone understanding what all others mean, resulting in much less strife and error.

Contrary to what most people expect, while Aristotle was such a huge deal in the Middle Ages that you could say *The Philosopher* and people knew you must mean Aristotle, his was actually the least popular of the ancient philosophical schools (beaten out by Platonists, Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans). So, at the end of antiquity when the old papyri were crumbling and Boethius was racing to translate only the most precious works before they were lost, he didn't bother with any of the books about how Aristotle thought the world or soul or politics or ethics works, he focused on the works on logic, how to do meticulous proofs, something applicable to *any* philosophical system, even Christianity. It was this which left medieval Europe with the *Organon*, and which made *The Philosopher* a synonym for *logic* textbooks. So, in the 1000s, when scholastics got a hold of the *Organon*, they used its methods to prove things about theology—instead of twenty-seven steps to prove two angles in a triangle are equal, or that justice is a balance of harms, it was 127 steps to prove that God is Good.

Why was this so exciting to medieval people?

Well, when a kid sick of geometry class complains to Mom, if she's an architect she'll answer that it's really important to be absolutely sure those angles in the triangle are equal, because if you're wrong the building will fall down and everyone will die. If a kid in Aristotle's classroom complains to Aristotle, he'll say that if you come to a false conclusion about justice you might pass an unjust law. If a kid in scholastic logic class complains to Thomas Aquinas, he'll say that if you come to a false conclusion in theology, then you're *damned to eternal torment and Hellfire forever and ever and ever, and so is everyone who reads your book*. Medieval theology was higher stakes than Aristotle defining systems of government, it was even higher stakes than architecture, it was super-mega-high-risk tightrope-over-a-lava-pit-with-alligators high-stakes, *and it was contagious!* It wasn't just your soul at risk, but thousands around you. So, when theologians saw that Aristotle's *Organon* had step-by-step instructions for how to do logical proofs *without the possibility of error*, they saw a safety net over the lava pit. (Note: Aristotle = *also* antiquity; medieval people *were* using it, just in different ways.)

Peter Abelard in particular was the master of coping when doctrine painted itself into a corner. By 1100 there had been a lot of theologian saints, and the stuff they said had entered the canon of the Church, but some of the stuff directly contradicts the other stuff, so… panic? Rather than arriving at God-is-unknowable-so-don't-try (which, contrary to a lot of claims, is mostly a Reformation innovation, *not* a common position in ancient or medieval Christianity), Abelard used logic chains to reconcile seemingly conflicting authorities. This passage from Saint Jerome *seems* to contradict this line from Saint Augustine (in that they say opposite things!), but if Abelard starts with a thirty-two-step proof that God is Good, and lands a triple-axel-triple-toe-loop combo jump, he can show that Jerome actually means the opposite of what he seems to say and Jerome and Augustine really agree! (Score 108.12, applause and sighs of relief as the Hellfire lava pit seems to recede.) Hence the title of Abelard's logic textbook, *Sic et non*, that is, *Yes and No*. Abelard was also as extraordinarily belligerent as he was glamorous and charismatic, and his talent at making an argument with an intellectual rival as dramatic as a cockfight or a bear baiting was a major reason this period saw philosophical and theological debates become a new form of thrilling public tournament. People in 1100 genuinely would line up to see monks from two orders, or a Christian and a Jewish theologian, debate in front of the king, and, love him or hate him, Abelard excited crowds like no one else.

In the next generation, Thomas Aquinas was even more exciting than Abelard, because he didn't just land triple axels and reconcile Church Fathers, he took on some of the biggest questions in medieval theology, like whether the *soul* is the self or the *body* is also essential to the self. Scripture says there will be a *bodily* resurrection at Judgment Day, which makes it sound like the body is important, but on the other hand people in Heaven right now don't have bodies and surely the saints can't be sitting around in Heaven saying, "Sure sucks having no body." So, do souls

need bodies or not? Yes *and* no, as Peter Abelard might say: two triple jump combos later, with a bunch of technical vocabulary involving the components of cognition, Aquinas argues that the physical body (brain) is essential for cognition, but that God's essence *substitutes for* the missing physical parts while people are in Heaven, and the super special perfected bodies made at resurrection will be even niftier, allowing the resurrected blessed to function fully without God's help. Doctrinal Christianity can now have its cake and eat it too.

Thomas Aquinas and his Thomist followers soon developed a rival in Duns Scotus (*c*.1266–1308). Scotists (connected with the Franciscans) and Thomists (connected with the Dominicans) differed mainly on whether *knowing/understanding* God or *loving/desiring* God is the best route to Heaven, the Dominicans backing knowledge and the Franciscans love. While the Thomists were dominant enough that Dunce as in "Dunce cap" was coined from *Duns* Scotus, i.e. the kid in the class so foolish they believe Scotus over Aquinas; yet, as with many intellectual disputes, the rivalry itself was enormously fruitful, generating fame and awe for all involved.

So, scholasticism was supercalifragilisticexpialidociously exciting—or, as they would've said in the period, *honorificabilitudinitatibusly* exciting, from scholastic Latin's infamous longest word. But scholasticism was also interminably technical, and you had to study its tools and terminology for years, memorizing definitions and types of syllogism, to get your safety certification to be considered ready to handle the deadly toxic nuclear-enriched uranium that was high-stakes theology. Scholasticism's opacity was a feature, not a bug, impenetrable technical language keeping non-experts safe from texts which, if even very slightly misunderstood, could reopen the pit to certain doom. This impenetrability of scholastic writing did not go unchallenged in the period. William of Ockham (*c*.1287–1347), known today for Ockham's razor, argued that the whole system was much too complicated, requiring too many elaborate definitions of things like the components of the cognitive organism, so he proposed… *to simplify it?* No! To replace it with a set of even more elaborate technical definitions for the components of concept formation! This was the *via moderna* in contrast with the Thomist/Scotist *via antiqua*. It doesn't sound very modern, and in most ways it wasn't, but Ockham's *via moderna* was actually a major step toward John Locke's *tabula rasa*, it just took another 350 years to catch on—a not uncommon wait time in the history of ideas.

The dukes and kings and wealthy abbots who could afford the libraries to do scholasticism were happy to pay for training experts, since there was nothing more useful personally (to your soul) or publicly (to your kingdom and its legitimacy) than understanding and pleasing the God who was the source of the universe, sender of plagues, granter of victories, planner of changes, and setter up and plucker down of kings. Elites funded monasteries, scriptoria, and grand libraries like the great University Library of Paris which, by 1300, had (brace yourself) 600 books! There's no corner book kiosk in an airport today that doesn't have more than 600 books, but remember that in 1300, 600 books cost at least $200 million dollars, and most of these were big, high-end books which cost a lot more than that.[37] Ambitious fathers were also happy to pay for their second sons to study scholasticism and go on to get good jobs. (For example, a Danish noble might study in Paris and someday be appointed Bishop of Iceland and Greenland! And get a handsome salary while totally slacking off in Denmark ignoring the needs of the Norse settlement!) But scholastic study could also be increeeeeeeeedibly booooooring, so you had a lot of youths who hated it, and wanted something different. By 1400 scholasticism was ripe for a rival: the classicizing *studia humanitatis*. (Important: the *studia humanitatis* could *also* be incredibly boring, and had its fair share of classroom refugees in later decades…)

Scholasticism being ripe for a rival does *not* mean it was ripe for *replacement*. We tend to teach intellectual waves as if the old one stops when the next one starts, but this river is widening, not turning from one river into another. Scholastic education thrived throughout the Renaissance, and there were always more scholastic classrooms than there were teaching the *studia humanitatis*. For a long time, historians accepted the claims of *umanisti* that they had replaced dry and pedantic medieval scholasticism, but even calling it *medieval* scholasticism is deceptive, since we have more scholastic material written *after* the Middle Ages than in them, and scholastic classrooms (many Jesuit-run) were all over Europe and its empires throughout the Enlightenment, and indeed today. Also, practitioners of the *studia humanitatis* read scholastic authors, studied them in school, treated them as authorities, and grappled with their ideas. Pico della Mirandola (of not-an-Oration not-on-the-Dignity-of-Man fame) even wrote a scholastic treatise just to prove he could. But *umanisti* wouldn't praise scholastics or quote their *ugly, un-classical* Latin, instead treating it as the rival they defined themselves against. Many scholastics also studied the *studia humanitatis*, and, as years passed, scholastic-dominated universities started hiring *umanisti* to teach ethics, rhetoric, Seneca, etc. Scholasticism thrived alongside (and often more broadly than) the *studia humanitatis*, but the self-consciously classicizing elements of the latter were a distinct innovation, which joined scholasticism as one more strand in the European intellectual braid.