



# VIRTUE OF NECESSITY

Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form  
in Chaucer's Poetry

Larry Sklute





VIRTUE OF  
NECESSITY

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,  
To maken vertu of necessitee,  
And take it weel that we may nat eschue,  
And namely that to us alle is due. . . .  
The contrarie of al this is wilfulnesse.

Chaucer's Knight's Theseus

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Larry Sklute

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## TO CAROL

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NECESSITY**

























## II

Until the twelfth century, Saint Augustine's Neoplatonic premises, epistemology, and method of reasoning prevailed throughout Christian Europe with little challenge. Like all Platonic philosophy, Augustinianism locates the Real ultimately in the Ideal Mind, *Nous*, God, the divine principle. Reasoning begins with the notion of a first cause outside human consciousness, from which there are traceable effects such as the world and the individual within it.

During the twelfth century, however, a developing interest in the individual consciousness produced an alternative epistemology that offered a changed direction of reasoning.<sup>16</sup> Some writers grew interested in reasoning not only from God to man, as the Augustinians had been doing, but also from man and his effects to God. For instance, as a first step in understanding the universe outside himself, and ultimately of understanding God, Richard of Saint Victor began by looking inward:

*Frusta cordis oculus erigit ad videndum Deum, qui nondum idoneus est ad videndum seipsum. Prius discat homo cognoscere invisibilia sua, quam praesumat posse apprehendere invisibilia divina. Prius est ut cognoscere invisibilia spiritus tui, quam possis esse idoneus ad cognoscendum invisibilia Dei. Alioquin si non potes cognoscere te, qua fronte praesumis apprehendere ea quae sunt suprate?*<sup>17</sup>

[In vain man raises his heart's eye to see God, if he is not yet fit to see himself. First let man come to know the invisible things of himself before he presume to grasp divine invisibilia. You must first understand your own spirit before you can be fit to understand the invisible things of God. In general, if you are not able to understand yourself, how can you presume to grasp those things which are above you?]

Richard was neither alone in this procedure nor the first. Eadmer, the biographer of Saint Anselm, tells us that the ontological proof for the existence of God that Anselm proposed occurred because Anselm began with the individual mind, his own, at the center of thought and excluded everything from it but the word "God."<sup>18</sup> Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, though less interested than Anselm in logic or analysis, more interested rather in spiritual growth, outlined his program for

Cistercian mysticism by beginning with man's love for himself as the first step in his search for God. In his *Liber de Diligendo Deo*, Bernard describes love, which arises first from "amor carnalis quo ante omnia homo diligit seipsum propter seipsum" [love of the flesh by which man loves himself before everything on account of himself] and arrives at the spiritual level "cum nec seipsum diligit homo nisi propter Deum" [whenever man does not love himself except on account of God].

This alternative epistemology also manifests itself in both the writings on friendship of Aelred de Rivaulx<sup>20</sup> and the writings on preaching of Guibert de Nogent. Here is Guibert:

Nulla enim praedicatio salubrior mihi videtur quam illa quae hominem sibi met ostendat, et foras extra se sparsum in interiori suo, hoc est in mente, restituat atque eum coarquens quodammodo depictum ante faciem suam statuat.<sup>21</sup>

[Truly no preaching seems to me more beneficial than that which displays a man to himself, replaces in his inner self, that is in his mind, what is extended outside of himself, and which in a certain way places him conclusively represented before his own eyes.]

Although this epistemology pervades the thinking of many significant writers of the twelfth century, like Peter Damiani, William of Saint Thierry, and John of Salisbury, it finds its most famous proponent in Peter Abelard, for whom it substantiated as famous a series of actions as works. The headnote of Abelard's *Ethics* reads: "Incipit Liber Magistri Petri Abelardi Qui Dicitur Scito Te Ipsum." Moreover, whatever may have been the doctrinal or moral reasons for writing *Historia Calamitatum*, in it Abelard offers a method of discovering meaning and purpose in life by the analytic scrutiny of one's own actions.<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on self that this epistemology at once enabled and produced appeared no less strongly in the realm of vernacular writing than it did in the realm of Latin. The first generation of writers of chivalric romance in the twelfth century explored a world centered upon the individual in which the subjective interpretation of reality was the norm, although "a reaction against the individual centered world-view of the twelfth century literature" seems to have taken place



in the prose cycles that developed early in the thirteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, philosophers of the thirteenth century continued to develop the alternative epistemological method that begins with the self and the senses. In consequence, they separated themselves increasingly from theologians, to whom the metaphysical premise of God as a first cause remained the prior consideration. Their attempts at systematizing this alternative epistemological method were sustained by newly translated commentaries on Aristotle, which reached the Christian West from Spain.

It is well known that the "new" Aristotle generated an enormous amount of philosophical activity in the thirteenth century. Like Augustinianism, the new Aristotelianism was interested in metaphysics. Unlike Augustinianism, however, it emphasized the sensible world and our awareness of it. Saint Thomas Aquinas's famous axiom encapsulates the matter succinctly: "Nihil in intellectu, nisi prius fuerit in sensu" [Nothing is in the intellect unless it was first in the senses]. Since the senses give us our first awareness, the system of reality that the mind constructs from experience must first rest on sensory apprehension of the world. Whereas Augustinianism, like all Platonic epistemology, begins with the metaphysical assumption that the Creator reveals or illumines us with the truth of his existence, i.e., his Essence, the Aristotelian epistemology that philosophers like Aquinas investigate accents the prior importance of the senses to all knowledge and the process of existence and its fulfillment (haecceity) as the mind reasons itself toward that same metaphysical understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Actually, Aquinas never intended to abandon the Augustinian epistemological method in favor of the Aristotelian. In fact, his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1258) in large measure attacks the implications of certain of Averroes' Aristotelian principles that, if accepted, threatened the validity of Augustinian theology.<sup>25</sup> Rather, much of Averroes' writing attempts to undo this threat by trying to align the role of reason, which the philosopher explored, and the role of revelation, which the theologian explored, for the ultimate and same metaphysical end of knowing God.<sup>26</sup>

Other philosophers, however, like Siger of Brabant and Boetius of Dacia, known as the "radical Aristotelians," sought to defend Averroes' doctrines by developing the concept of the double truth. Accord-

ing to the concept of the double truth, when a conclusion in philosophy is logically reached but contradicts the conclusion of theology, the truths of both conclusions may stand as long as they are kept categorically separate, the one true for philosophy, the other true for theology. Historians of philosophy find the idea of the double truth significant because it means the separation of theology from philosophy. I find the idea interesting because it suggests that as early as the thirteenth century people understood truth to exist in kinds and to reside in alternatives; moreover philosophers were willing to allow contradiction to remain unresolved. The idea of the double truth thus provides an early philosophical analogue for the skepticism of certainty that Chaucer, among other writers of the late Middle Ages, expresses in his poetry.<sup>27</sup>

The official church consistently condemned such a possibility as a double truth. Yet the notion enjoyed wide consideration in the universities throughout the last decades of the thirteenth century and created vigorous intellectual controversies.<sup>28</sup> For the most part, these controversies, like the double truth itself, result from the competition between Augustinian and Aristotelian methods for understanding reality. Assuming that metaphysics was possible and demonstrable, Aristotelians emphasized deduction through the evidence of the senses. The direction of their reasoning thus changed the process by which the will moved to an understanding of God. Opposed to these thinkers were Augustinians, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham the most famous of them, who believed that this method of reasoning ultimately determined God's motives by making them susceptible to man's reasoning power. They sought to insure the freedom of the will of both God and man by denying that commonly held theological conclusions, like God's existence, His free will, and man's understanding of it, could be rationally demonstrated. Rather they argued that such truths could only be known in the light of revelation.<sup>29</sup>

William of Ockham's ideas are most significant for us not only because they won widest favor in the English universities of Chaucer's day but because they are pivotal in the development of our modern way of understanding reality. According to Ockham intuitive knowledge, what the mind knows only by experience, is the only knowledge that represents reality existing outside one's mind. Ockham tells us: "Nihil

potest naturaliter cognosci in se nisi cognoscat intuitive" [Nothing can be known naturally in itself unless it is known intuitively].<sup>30</sup> Abstraction, the process by which the mind systematizes and universalizes particulars—a kind of knowledge since it involves a mental process—is actually a reflection that the mind makes, not necessarily a part of the object the mind perceives: "Abstractiva autem est ista virtute cuius de re contingenti non potest sciri evidenter utrum sit vel non sit" [Abstractive ability, moreover, is that by whose power concerning a contingent matter there can be no evident knowledge of whether it exists or does not exist].<sup>31</sup> Since abstract knowledge derives from the perceiving mind and not from the object that the senses experience, universals exist only within the mind. Value, which inheres in the universal and from which ethics derives, cannot reside in experiential reality. It is rather a mental construct, intrinsic in the mind and having reference to systems within the mind.

Ockham's philosophy not only isolates intuitive from abstract knowledge in a way that had not been done before; in effect it denies an intrinsic, independent reality to anything that the senses do not perceive. Particulars are intrinsically real, but they are not ethically charged in themselves. Universals and the things pertaining to them, like ethical principles, are purely mental concepts, deriving from an authority that ranges from the wisdom of the ancient teachers like Aristotle and Augustine to the incontrovertible and free will of God revealed by grace, as in the Ten Commandments. Universals have no existence within the bounds of sense experience.

Although Ockham's ideas enjoyed widespread popularity in the universities throughout the fourteenth century, there is no indication of how many people actually believed with the philosophers of the *via moderna*, those who followed Ockham, that reality could be known from within the mind and intentionally by means of authority or conceptualization and from outside the mind by the experience of sense data. There is an indication that theologians like Bishop Bradwardine and John Wycliff attacked the principles and attitudes of the *via moderna*, particularly the skepticism about knowledge that these Ockhamist principles implied.<sup>32</sup> The vehemence of the attacks suggests first that there was something profoundly threatening to Christian tradition in what these philosophers were saying and, second, that the subversive





































































































































































































































































































































