

## SIGER AND THE SKEPTIC

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Most assessments of Siger of Brabant's contribution to philosophy have tended to focus on his adoption of Averroistic noetics, a position he would later renounce, and on his supposed role as the factious leader of a group of "Latin Averroists" within the Faculty of Arts, an enduring myth finally put to rest by R.-A. Gauthier.<sup>1</sup> He is now more accurately viewed as a staunch and indeed unrepentant proponent of philosophy as an autonomous discipline, a man who believed that the professional philosopher should go about his business exploring Aristotle's arguments wherever they might lead, an attitude both reckless and admirable for which he would come to some grief toward the end of his short life.<sup>2</sup>

The bulk of his writings are made up of commentaries on works by, or attributed to, Aristotle, but he is also the author of a number of disputed questions on ethics, logic and natural philosophy, all heavily indebted to Aristotle as well. He owes much—unsurprisingly—to Averroes, and Arab philosophers generally, but he was also influenced by Thomas Aquinas whom he greatly admired. But Siger was not uncritical of his sources, and although I know of no instance where he disagrees philosophically with Aristotle, he did, at times, openly disagree with both Aquinas and, to a lesser degree, with

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<sup>1</sup> See the seminal two part article by René-Antoine Gauthier, "Notes sur Siger de Brabant, I. Siger en 1265," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 67 (1983): 201–232, and "Notes sur Siger de Brabant, II. Siger en 1272–1275, Aubry de Reims et la scission des Normands," *ibid.*, 68 (1984): 3–49. In the following I will be discussing principally two works of Siger, the *Impossibilia* and the *Questions on the Metaphysics*. All references to the *Impossibilia* are to Bernardo Carlos Bazán's edition, Siger de Brabant, *Écrits de logique, de morale et de physique*, Philosophes Médiévaux, 14 (Louvain: Publications universitaires/ Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1974), 67–97. When quoting from this work I shall refer to it as *I*, followed by the number of the *impossibile* according to the order in which it appears in the edition, followed by the page number and the lineation. Two editions exist of the *Questions on the Metaphysics*, a work that has survived in four different "reportations," i.e., student notes, each in a different manuscript. William Dunphy published an edition based on the reportations found in two manuscripts, one in Munich and another in Vienna: Siger de Brabant, *Quaestiones in Metaphysicam*, Philosophes Médiévaux, 24 (Louvain: Publications universitaires/ Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1981); Armand Maurer followed a couple of years later with two editions of the same work, the first based on a Cambridge manuscript, the second on a Parisian one, the latter probably being the reportation taken by Godfrey of Fontaines. Both editions are published in Siger de Brabant, *Quaestiones in Metaphysicam*, Philosophes Médiévaux, 25 (Louvain: Publications universitaires/ Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1983). As the texts of these editions sometimes differ significantly in wording, I shall refer to the one whose wording is clearest—but I shall not quote from Godfrey's reportation. The two editions from which I will quote will be abbreviated respectively as *QiMD* and *QiMM*, followed in each case, first, by the book number in Roman numerals, then the question number, and finally the page and lineation when necessary. A complete bibliography of Siger, including both the edited work and secondary literature, is found on <http://www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/pironet/Siger/SigerBiblio.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In 1277, Siger, together with two other clerics from Liège, was summoned at Saint-Quentin by the Inquisitor of France, Simon du Val, under the suspicion of heresy. What happened immediately afterwards is a matter of some dispute. Some historians claim that Siger fled to Italy. But according to Gauthier Siger stood trial and was probably acquitted (See "Notes sur Siger de Brabant, II," 27).

Averroes.<sup>3</sup> This critical stance toward his predecessors has lead William Dunphy to talk of a “Sigerian interpretation of Aristotle” or a “Sigerian Aristotelianism.”<sup>4</sup>

Siger often voices objections or difficulties not directly addressed by Aristotle that he attempts to resolve using Aristotelian principles. This is specifically the case with his refutation of skepticism, a topic to which Siger devoted considerable attention.<sup>5</sup> Siger’s discussion is interesting for two reasons. First, because in arguing against skepticism, he presents the outlines of a plausible and indeed appealing theory of perception, distinct in its focus from those of Averroes and Aquinas whose commentaries he made greatest use of in the preparation of his own commentary. Second, because his discussions offer invaluable insight into the assumptions of Aristotle’s theory of perception and to its medieval reception, a theory that would remain influential until the advent of the Modern Age, and indeed some versions of which are still today looked upon longingly by some proponents of “direct” or “commonsense” realism. In this paper, I shall focus essentially on the first point basing myself on the second of Siger’s *Impossibilia* as well as his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

## I

*The skeptic’s argument in the Impossibilia.* Siger is the author of six *impossibilia*, disputed sometime between 1270 and 1273.<sup>6</sup> *Impossibilia* are best described as a type of

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<sup>3</sup> In his commentary of Book III of the *Metaphysics* Siger asks whether there is a first efficient cause of all effects, and notes that this is the opinion of Aristotle, Avicenna, Proclus and almost all Peripatetics. He adds, however, that “authority alone is not sufficient in the search for truth...,” *QiMM*, III, q. 5, 84, 39. Elsewhere he writes that basing oneself on an idea’s popularity (*famositate*) as a ground for its truth is to rely on the reason of others as if one did not possess reason or intellect oneself. *QiMM*, IV, q. 33, 179, 13–15. Siger believed that doctrines in matters of faith were true, but that, in most cases—creation being an exception—their truth could not be proved by reason. He also believed however that there were arguments whose conclusions were contrary to those of faith that could not be disproved by reason which was not to say that are true. As a result, Siger felt that the expositor of Aristotle should feel no qualms about exploring any of the Philosopher’s arguments, for if the conclusions of any of those arguments were contrary to those of faith that meant they contained some fallacy discoverable by reason, or if philosophical discussion could reveal no fallacy, at the very least it meant that they were wrong. In one text, Siger chided Aquinas for purposely “covering-up”—or so Siger seems to insinuate—the Philosopher’s intention, presumably because he was scared of the conclusions. (*QiMM*, III, q. 15, 110; see also II, q. 14, 58). An even more severe rebuke can be found in Siger’s commentary on the *Book of Causes*, Quaestio <2>, *Les Quaestiones super librum de causis de Siger de Brabant*, ed. Antonio Marlasca, Philosophes Médiévaux, 12 (Louvain: Publications universitaires/ Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1972), 40.

<sup>4</sup> On Siger’s attachment to the spirit of the Philosopher right until the end of his short professorial career, see Fernand Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Philosophes Médiévaux, 9 (Louvain: Publications universitaires/ Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1966), 391, and Antonio Marlasca’s comments in his introduction to his edition of Siger’s commentary on the *Book of Causes*, 25–29.

<sup>5</sup> See Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 270.

<sup>6</sup> See Bernardo Bazán, Siger de Brabant, *Écrits de logique, de morale et de physique*, 26, and Martin Grabmann’s still valuable monograph: *Die Sophismataliteratur des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts, mit Textausgabe eines Sophisma von Boetius von Dacien: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Einwirkens der aristotelischen Logik auf die Ausgestaltung der mittelalterlichen philosophischen Disputation*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, XXXVI,1, (Münster i. W.: Aschendorff, 1940). For a general presentation of Siger’s *Impossibilia*, see Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger de Brabant*, Philosophes Médiévaux, 21 (Louvain-Paris: Publications universitaires-Vander-Oyez, 1977), 92–94.

*sophisma* which Norman Kretzmann once defined as “a sentence puzzling in its own right or on the basis of a certain assumption, designed to bring some abstract issue into focus,” which figured prominently in the University curricula starting in the second half of the Thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The definition could apply equally to *impossibilia*, the difference being that an *impossibile* was viewed not merely as a puzzling sentence but a downright absurd one. As was the case with *sophismata*, at least initially, *impossibilia*, were used as exercises in the Faculty of Arts, geared toward helping students hone their dialectical skills, and readying them for the exacting discipline of the *disputatio*.<sup>8</sup>

Siger’s *Impossibilia* deal with several kinds of impossibility: metaphysical impossibility, as in *I1* (“God does not exist”); physical impossibility, as in *I3* (“The Trojan war is happening in this instant”) and *I4* (“Some unimpeded, upward lying heavy object would not fall”); ethical impossibility, as in *I5* (“In human affairs there is no evil action in virtue of whose evil that action should be prohibited or someone punished for committing it”); logical impossibility, as in *I6* (“It is possible for something to both be and not to be, and for contradictories to be true of each other or of the same thing”); and finally, epistemic impossibility, as in *I2*: “everything that appears to us are illusions (*simulacra*) and similar to dreams, so that we are certain of the existence of anything.”

Making the skeptical argument an example of *impossibile* is in itself a significant move on Siger’s part and needs underscoring at the outset: Skepticism is simply not viewed as posing a credible theoretical threat.<sup>9</sup> When all is said and done Siger views all skeptical arguments, however clever, as pieces of sophistry devoid of any real purchase on our actual beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

The general position the skeptic wants to argue for is that “one ought not to trust a power to which something appears that is mere appearance, unless another power judges that it is so.”<sup>11</sup> By ‘power’ Siger (and the skeptic) means cognitive powers—that is, the senses and the intellect. One of the consequences of this position, quite apart from the fact that it leads to an infinite regress, is that it implies that the senses in and of themselves are not trustworthy sources of knowledge, indeed that they are not sources of knowledge at all. The skeptic, Siger tells us, argued for this position in two ways.

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Kretzmann, “Socrates is whiter than Socrates Begins to be White,” *Noûs* 11 (1977): 6. There is abundant literature dealing with the topic of *sophismata*. One recent and thorough treatment on *sophismata* as a literary genre and its relation to disputations is Olga Weijers, *La ‘disputatio’ à la Faculté des arts de Paris (1200–1350 environ), esquisse d’une typologie*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 68–91.

<sup>8</sup> See Pierre Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l’averroïsme latin au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Les Philosophes Belges : textes et études, 6 (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1911), 124–125, and Olga Weijers, *La ‘disputatio,’* 86.

<sup>9</sup> See *QiMM*, IV, q. 37, 186, 61–65.

<sup>10</sup> A similar dismissal of the arguments invoked against the existence of motion is to be found in an anonymous series of questions on Aristotle’s *Physics*. No attribution is found in the sole manuscript in which this Commentary is contained, but it is Sigerian in style and content, and its attribution to Siger is accepted, or at least viewed as highly probable, by many scholars. *Ein Kommentar zur Physik des Aristoteles aus der Pariser Artistenfakultät um 1273*, ed. Albert Zimmermann, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & co., 1968). See in particular questions 9, 10 and 11. See Van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger de Brabant*, 196 regarding the possible Sigerian authorship of this work.

<sup>11</sup> *I2*, 73, 7–9.

His first argument is that a sense that is prone to illusion can generate no certitude with respect to its objects.<sup>12</sup> By ‘prone to illusion’, the skeptic presumably means that the senses sometimes lead us astray, and he could be implying that for a power to generate *bona fide* knowledge it must always generate veridical perceptions. The senses would be trustworthy only if they were infallible. Thus construed the argument is really quite powerful and it is not clear that Siger has grasped its full force for he merely points out in his answer to it that the inference from “this sense has led me astray once before” to “therefore it will lead me astray again” is fallacious.

To the first argument against <our position> it must be said that although something may appear to a power in one of its sensations which is a mere appearance so that this sensation is not to be trusted, <it does not follow> that that power is not to be trusted in another of its sensations.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, even if Siger had grasped the full force of the objection he would probably have rejected it outright. Siger, following Aristotle, believed that sensation involved three elements: the sensible object, the medium and the sense organ. Although Aristotle had explained that, in the act of perception, the sensible quality in actuality and the sense in actuality were one,<sup>14</sup> a view Siger naturally agrees with, Aristotle also felt that the fact that the sensible quality must cross a medium and be received in the sense meant that it might not be received *as it is* in the sensible object, either because of the indisposition of the medium or of the organ.<sup>15</sup> In a sense, the physics of perception make some measure of error inevitable.

The skeptic’s second argument proceeds in three steps. He argues first that just as (A) we do not believe (*creditur*) that something that appears to a sense is an illusion unless a superior power judges it to be so (...*hoc diiudicantem*), so too (B) the sense will not be believed (*non creditur*) unless a superior power judges (*diiudicet*) that it is not an illusion.<sup>16</sup> The skeptic then takes B as the major of his second argument which runs thus:

**P** We must not believe a sense to which things appear that are mere illusions unless another power judges that this is so

**P** But *all* senses are such that things appear that are mere appearances.

**C** Therefore we must not believe any sense that things are such as they appear.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the skeptic goes on to argue that if we cannot trust the senses then we cannot trust the conclusions proceeding from a superior power either, as all certitude ultimately derives from the senses.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *I2*, 73, 9–10.

<sup>13</sup> *I2*, 76, 75–80: “Ad rationem primam in oppositum dicendum quod, quamquam alicui virtuti una eius sensatione appareat aliquid quod sit apparentia tantum et illi sensationi eius non creditur, non tamen oportet quod illi virtuti secundum aliam eius sensationem non creditur per se quod ita sit in re.”

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.2.425b26.

<sup>15</sup> *QiMM*, IV, q. 9, 148, 19–24.

<sup>16</sup> *I2*, 73, 10–14.

<sup>17</sup> *I2*, 73, 14 – 74, 18.

Siger provides two distinct answers to this second argument. His first answer is to reject the inference from A to B. He justifies this rejection by saying “that it does not belong to the nature of a sense to which something appears that is illusion to judge (*iudicare*) that it is an illusion. One does not turn to it, but to some other (faculty) to whom it belongs to judge, such as the intellect.”<sup>19</sup> However, Siger tells us, we *are* entitled to take the sense’s word for it that a particular perception is *not* an illusion provided “no deception is made manifest by a more worthy sense or by a concept derived from a more worthy sense,” in which case “it ought to be believed as veridical without (appeal to) a superior faculty.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, whereas the skeptic says that the sense must appeal to the superior power both to judge that something is an illusion and to judge that it is veridical, Siger contends that it is only necessary to appeal to the superior power to judge that something is an illusion. The position might strike one as odd in the sense that it seems to attribute to the senses the capacity to judge that something is not an illusion (but not that something is not) and to the intellect the capacity to judge that something is an illusion (but not that something is not an illusion).

The difficulty here might be due in part to Siger’s use of the word ‘judgement’. Following medieval practise Siger sometimes talks about the senses as able to “judge” (*diiudicare*<sup>21</sup>). In *I2* 76, 90–94, however, where he refers explicitly to intellect, *in contradistinction to sense*, as “some other (faculty) to whom it belongs to judge (*iudicare*),” he is using the word in its technical sense of affirming and denying. Siger’s point is simply that the testimony of the sense (its “judgement”) in certain specific cases is a sufficient reason for believing that things are as the sense senses them. Recourse to a superior power—the intellect, whose proper act is judgement—is not necessary; whereas such recourse becomes necessary in order to believe that some deliverance is non veridical. What Siger wants to say, then, is that sense deliverances, or at least certain types of sense deliverances, are veridical by default and hence credible *per se*, a position we will see him defend at length.

Siger’s second answer to the second argument is to say that by requiring the sanction of another faculty to validate the testimony of the senses is to demand an explanation (*rationem quaerere*) for what is known *per se*; but this would amount to requiring an explanation for everything, from which it follows that nothing will have an explanation. Also, if every belief requires a demonstration of its truth, an infinite regress of explanations will ensue, and therefore there will be no first cause of belief.<sup>22</sup> The arguments only work of course if we assume that the senses do yield obvious, *per se* knowledge, but this, as we will now see in more detail, is precisely Siger’s point.

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<sup>18</sup> *I2*, 74, 18–22.

<sup>19</sup> *I2* 76, 90–94.

<sup>20</sup> *I2*, 76, 94–97.

<sup>21</sup> See also *I2*, 75, 53.

<sup>22</sup> *I2* 76, 98–103. See also *QiMM*, IV, q. 36, 187, 66–69.

## II

*Sense and evidence.* The point is stated succinctly in his *solutio*:

It must be said that we are certain of the existence of certain things, and <that> all <appearances> are not merely illusions and passions of sentient subjects. Thus we are certain of the existence of things that appear to our senses, provided that sense is not contradicted by a more worthy sense or a reason (*intellectus*) taken from a more worthy sense. We are also certain by the intellect of the existence of certain intelligibles, provided the reason (*intellectus*) is not contradicted by a more worthy reason or <one> taken from a more worthy sense, or by a more worthy sense.<sup>23</sup>

Siger's solution to the skeptic's challenge is based on a distinction between what he calls "more and less worthy senses." It is, he contends, the failure to take this distinction into account that has led philosophers into error.<sup>24</sup> Siger lists three errors that have arisen as a result of this failure. The first error is to infer from the fact that some sense deliverance turns out to be non-veridical that every deliverance is illusory. The second error is to infer from the fact that some sensations are veridical that this must be so in the case of all sensations. The third error is committed by those who base themselves on some sense, argument, image or opinion not taken from a more worthy sense, but whose testimony is incompatible with that of the more worthy sense, and who dismiss the latter. This, Siger tells us, is the error Aristotle attributed to Zeno who argued that everything is at rest against the evidence of a sense more worthy of being believed.<sup>25</sup> The key to not committing these errors is realizing that "all senses are not equally worthy of being believed."<sup>26</sup> Thus the sense of taste of the healthy individual is to be trusted more than the sick person's; a person awake is more worthy of being believed than one asleep; the proper sensible more than the common sensible, and the sensible *per se* more than the sensible by accident.<sup>27</sup> The greatest degree of certitude however is the one the sense gets from sensing its proper object:

... [N]o one can be induced to believe that that white that he sees is not white, neither through the habit of hearing the opposite nor by sophistical arguments.<sup>28</sup>

Part of the interest of Siger's answer stems from the fact he seems to allow a certain positive role for the intellect, for he explicitly states that a "reason" stemming from the intellect *can* lead to the overruling of a sense's "judgment" that some deliverance is

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<sup>23</sup> *I2*, 74, 33–39: "Dicendum quod nos sumus certi de existentia aliquarum rerum, et non sunt omnia simulacra et passiones sentientium. Nos enim sumus certi de existentia rerum nobis apparentium, cui sensui non contradicit sensus dignior vel intellectus acceptus ex sensu digniore. Sumus etiam certi per intellectum de existentia aliquorum intelligibilium, cui intellectui non contradicit intellectus dignior seu acceptus ex sensu digniore, nec etiam sensus dignior; ita quod qui non distinguunt inter sensum digniorem et minus dignum ut ei credatur, incidunt in diversos errores."

<sup>24</sup> *I2*, 74, 39–41.

<sup>25</sup> *I2*, 75, 50–51. See also *QiMD*, IV, q. 35, 233, 14–18.

<sup>26</sup> *I2*, 75, 64.

<sup>27</sup> *I2*, 75, 65–69; *QiMM*, qq. 34&35, 181, 52–55.

<sup>28</sup> *QiMM*, IV, q. 37, 186, 61–63: "... nec enim assuetudine audiendi contrarium, nec ex aliquibus rationibus sophisticis potest aliquis induci ad credendum illud quod videt album non esse album."

veridical. But this, Siger tells us, can only occur if the reason (*intellectus*) is itself based on the testimony of a sense more worthy of being believed.<sup>29</sup> For instance, if I am on a boat and my sense “judges” that people standing on the shore are in motion,<sup>30</sup> I can overturn that judgment by observing that the boat I am on is in motion with respect to the water, and reflecting that when in the past I have been standing on the shore I did not see or feel myself moving, and thence conclude that it is I and not the people on the shore who are in motion. Although my conclusion would be based on an argument, it would nonetheless ultimately rest on the testimony of a sense more worthy of being believed, whereas the subtle argumentation of Zeno which aims at overruling the sense’s judgment concerning the existence of motion, is not. The question, of course, that immediately arises, is how I *know* that some particular deliverance is more worthy of being believed. Siger’s answer is that, well, I just know:

I say that that which is perceived (*sentitur*) is such as it is perceived is known by nothing else than that it is perceived to be such by that sense and by no other.<sup>31</sup>

His source for this belief might be Averroes who in his summary of Aristotle’s argument in *Metaphysics* 1010b9–14 had contended that “Aristotle means that we have a primary cognition (*prima cognitio*) by which we distinguish between (the case) where the sense is in error (*sensus falsat*) and where it is veridical.”<sup>32</sup> Siger does not refer to this passage but its tenor squares nicely with his own position. In any case, Siger gets quite irritated at the thought that one could fail to acknowledge this:

To one who does not recognize that a sense is more worthy <of being believed> than another and that some sensation is to be believed *per se*, but who seeks a demonstration for the fact that it is as it appears, to him nothing can be proved, he can be certain of nothing. For it is not possible that something be known or believed, unless there be something that is known and believed *per se*, not through something else.<sup>33</sup>

If, to boot, the evidence of the proper sense is corroborated by other sense information, disbelief becomes downright absurd:

When all the senses concur in the judgment of some sensible thing and they are not opposed by a reason taken from more worthy senses, believing the opposite seems

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<sup>29</sup> This in turn could explain why Siger felt that the senses do not need the intellect to regard a perception as veridical, though it does not explain how the intellect would be in a position to judge that something is an illusion.

<sup>30</sup> This is the only example of sensory illusion provided by Siger in *I2* (74, 43 - 75, 44).

<sup>31</sup> *QiMD*, IV, q. 4, 229, 46–47.

<sup>32</sup> Averroes, *Metaph.*, IV, com 24, *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis*, vol. VIII, (Venice: Apud Iunctas, 1562–1574), fol. 91 M.

<sup>33</sup> *I2*, 75, 69 - 76, 74: “Qui autem aliquem sensum esse digniorem quam alium et alicui sensationi per se credendum non accipit, sed huius rationem quaerit quae ostendat quod sit ita sicut apparet, huic nihil probari potest, iste de nullo certus esse potest. Non enim possibile est aliquid esse cognitum vel creditum, nisi sit aliquid quod per se, non per aliud, cognoscatur, cui per se, non per aliud credatur.”

supernatural and almost magical rather than natural, unless one has been accustomed to this from childhood.<sup>34</sup>

There is nothing we can do in case someone denies that some senses are to be trusted more than others, the idea here being that the certitude afforded by sensation is the strongest form of certitude we have; if *it* does not convince the skeptic nothing else possibly could either. In a passage of his commentary on the *Metaphysics*,<sup>35</sup> Siger suggests that those who question the evidence of sense knowledge do not recognize evidence when they see it, and that given that nothing will generate more certitude than the perception of the proper sense, searching for an additional validating proof is bound to be a vain enterprise. He then recalls the argument we have just quoted, that unless something were known *per se*, that is, unless there was some initial certitude, nothing at all would be certain, for where there is no first certitude there will be no subsequent one either.<sup>36</sup> It is, he explains, just as necessary to appeal to a first certitude in the order of knowledge as it is to a first cause in the order of being:

If there is not a first known thing, which is not founded on anything prior, then nothing at all will be known, just as if there were not a first being whose being was not caused by another cause, there would no being at all.<sup>37</sup>

Now Siger might very well be right about this last claim, but it cannot count as an argument in favor of the thesis that the first certitude is to be found in *sense perception*, for it is perfectly compatible with the truth of the principle that there must be a first certitude that the first certitude reside in another power, for instance the intellect. But of course, Siger takes it for granted that intellectual knowledge is grounded in sense knowledge, so that saying that there must be a first certitude really means that the first certitude must be grounded in sense perception. Still, we might feel that Siger needs to offer some basis for the thesis that some sensations are evident *per se* and that the evidence provided by the senses is the strongest, beyond merely assuring us that this just is the case.

There are a few passages in Siger's writings that seem to tackle this problem. One is in q. 34 of Book IV of the commentary on the *Metaphysics*, where he explains that when perceivers are confronted with conflicting sense reports (I 'see' sweetness, but what I taste is bitter) it is a matter of empirical fact that they believe one more than the other, and Siger's ground for that belief is that, once again as a matter of empirical fact, people always act on the basis of one of two or more conflicting sense reports. If a person were ever in a position of believing equally two conflicting sense reports, then we would see her acting in a way which was coherent with each belief, which is absurd. In another

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<sup>34</sup> *I2*, 75, 52–57: “Cum autem omnes sensus concorditer convenient in iudicio alicuius rei sensibilis, quibus etiam intellectus acceptus ex sensibus dignioribus non contradicit, credere oppositum illius supernaturale videtur et miraculosum magis quam naturale, nisi forte aliquibus accidere possit ex consuetudine a pueritia.”

<sup>35</sup> *QiMM*, IV, q. 34, 229–230, 65–72.

<sup>36</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4.4.1006a9–10.

<sup>37</sup> *QiMM*, IV, q. 37, 187, 66–69: “Si enim non sit aliquid primo notum, cuius simpliciter non sit aliquid prius notificans, nihil simpliciter erit notum, sicut si non esset aliquod Primum Ens, cuius simpliciter non esset alia causa essendi, nihil penitus esset ens.”

formulation of the same point,<sup>38</sup> Siger notes that if two deliverances appeared equally certain to an observer then when judging one to be true the observer would not cease to believe that the other is true, which is also not what we observe. The point, then, is simply that people's behavior shows that they just do trust certain sense deliverances:

... [T]hose who say that there is nothing in the judgment of the sense that ought to be believed more, even though they say this, do not actually believe it, as we can tell from their actions.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, all this tells us is that people are prone to behave in certain ways, not that they are right in doing so. Yet the suggestion that they are not, Siger believes, seems so far-fetched as to be devoid of any real philosophical interest. We need to look at Siger's reasons for believing this.

### III

*The ontology of sensation.* When Siger assures us that "no one can be induced to believe that the white that he sees is not white,"<sup>40</sup> he means to point to two things: first, that the sense is infallible with regard to its own sensations, that is, the object is qualitatively as it is sensed, and second, that it cannot doubt that the object it senses exists. The first point emerges clearly from the following text.

By what makes it certain that things are such as this judgment says more than what that judgment says? I say that it is known that what is sensed is such and not otherwise by the fact that it is sensed as such by the proper sense, so that if it is judged by sight that something is sweet, but by taste that it is bitter, it is known that it is determinately bitter by the fact that it is sensed as such by taste. And if someone should require that this be made known by some other <reason>, [...] he is looking for a reason where no reason ought to be sought, as Aristotle says here.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond that, the sense cannot doubt that there actually exists something that it senses:

... [W]here no doubt is possible, one is not to look for an additional grounding; but this <thing> that some person sees as white, he does not doubt that it is white; which is why one ought not to ask for additional grounding. The minor is evident since when there is vision of some actual white, it <i.e. vision> always says that it is white and always judges it <to be> in the same way; which is why it does not err

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<sup>38</sup> *QiMD*, IV, q. 34, 230, 78–82.

<sup>39</sup> *QiMM*, IV, qq. 34&35, 181, 56–58.

<sup>40</sup> *QiMM*, IV, q. 37, 186, 61–63.

<sup>41</sup> *QiMM*, IV, qq. 34&45, 182, 65–72; II, q. 23, 73, 16–18: "Sed per quid certum est ita se habere sicut dicit hoc iudicium magis quam sicut dicit aliud? Dico quod cognoscitur quod id quod sentitur tale sit et non contrario modo se habens per hoc quod sensu proprio tale sentitur, ut si visu iudicetur aliquid dulce, gustu autem amarum, cognoscitur ipsum determinate esse amarum per hoc quod gustu tale sentitur. Et si aliquis quaerat hoc sibi fieri notum per aliud, in principio rationis rationem quaerit ubi ratio non est quaerenda, ut hic dicit Aristoteles."

in that <knowledge>; which is why that man does not doubt that that was white. And I do not only mean that man does not doubt that that white which he sees <that> he senses and sees as white, but I also mean that that man does not doubt that that which he sees as white and of which there is vision actually exists (*esse*); thus one ought not to always ask for some other proof, but one must rest in the sense as in the principle.<sup>42</sup>

This last passage offers a striking statement of what one commonly refers to as “medieval realism.” Siger is not merely asserting that I cannot be wrong about the existence of my inner experiences, he is asserting that when I sense white I cannot doubt the existence of an object of the sensing, the existence of some actually white thing, though I can be wrong about just which object it is.

It is instructive to read Siger’s commentary of Aristotle’s discussion of this very point in *Metaphysics* 4.5.1010b19–26, and to note his attendant disagreement with Aquinas’s reading of this passage. Aristotle’s goal here is to show that the proper sense is always right about its object or quality and yet that the sense can judge differently at different times. Does this mean that the object actually changes? Aristotle’s answer is that in fact the sense *never* disagrees about its quality, the disagreement arises only “about that to which the quality belongs.”<sup>43</sup> Aquinas offers a very literal reading of this passage, one that is in fact little more than a paraphrase, noting that any change that occurs in the perceived quality is due either to a change in the object itself (the wine going from sweet to bitter) or to a change in the sentient subject. The litigious passage follows:

But the sense of taste never changes its judgment without judging sweetness itself to be such as it considered it to be in the sweet thing when it judged it to be sweet.<sup>44</sup>

This last sentence, Sigers avers, amounts to a misinterpretation of Aristotle:

Some understand Aristotle to claim that concerning sweetness <the sense> does not change its judgment without judging that <thing> to be how it senses it. But

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<sup>42</sup> *Q<sup>i</sup>MD*, IV, q. 35, 234, 53–62: “...[I]n quo nullus potest dubitare, non est quaerendum aliud notificans ipsum; sed in hoc quod quis videt album, quin sit album non dubitat; quare aliud notificans ad hoc non est quaerendum. Minor patet, quia visus si fuerit albi, semper illud dicit esse album et semper eodem modo iudicat; quare in hoc non errat; quare quin hoc fuerit album non dubitat. Et non solum dico quod homo non dubitat quin illud quod videt album sentiat et videat album, sed etiam dico quod homo non dubitat hoc esse quod ipse videt album et cuius est sibi visio; non igitur est semper quaerendum aliud notificans, sed in sensu est standum sicut in principio.”

<sup>43</sup> Here is the passage from Aristotle: “But not even at different moments does one sense disagree about the quality, but only about that to which the quality belongs. I mean, for instance, the same wine might seem, if either it or one’s body changed, at one time sweet and at another time not sweet; but at least the sweet such as it is when it exists, has never yet changed, but one is always right about it, and that which is to be sweet must of necessity be of such and such a nature.” Aristotle, *Metaphysics, The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1595–1596.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *In XII Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. M.-R. Cathala, R. M. Spiazzi (Torino: Marietti, 1950), IV, lectio 14, n. 703: “Sed nunquam gustus mutat iudicium suum quin ipsam dulcedinem talem iudicet esse qualem perpendit in dulci, quando iudicavit eam esse dulcem.”

this is incorrect: in order for <a sense> to always judge in the same way regarding sweetness, as Aristotle claims, it is not only necessary that <the sense> judge it <to be> such as it senses it, for it does not always sense it under the same quality, sometimes <it senses it> as sweet, sometimes as bitter, but it is also necessary that it judge it to be as it *is*. Thus, when taste judges that sweetness is bitter, one must understand that <the judgment refers> not only to the sweetness but also to the bitter humor existing in the tongue. Hence, when it judges in this way, it does <not> judge sweet to be bitter, but rather that to which it belongs to be it judges to be bitter, so that that which pertains to the same sweetness it always judges in the same way, i.e. that it is sweet.<sup>45</sup>

There is perhaps nothing really substantial about Siger's disagreement with Aquinas. Indeed Aquinas shares all the realist assumptions regarding sense perception with his colleague at the Faculty of Arts; Siger seems to seize upon a slightly infelicitous choice of words on Aquinas's part to underscore a point that Aquinas agreed with anyway.<sup>46</sup> Still, though the point is a minor one, it does bring out in a striking way the extent of Siger's realistic commitment: sensing for Siger is never just a mental occurrence; the judgment of sweetness is not about how I perceive things, it is not about contents of the mind, it is about the nature of the things I perceive. This does not mean that qualities cannot be considered mentally; they can, as Siger makes perfectly clear, but they are not thought to be possible objects of investigation apart from their connection to their physical substrate. This very point emerges again in a passage from Siger's commentary at the beginning of bk. IV of the *Metaphysics*. There he tells us that the sense senses its object, the sensible, as well as itself sensing the object. In this latter kind of knowledge the sense cannot be wrong. Error can only arise in two ways, either with respect to the sensible object if the sense organ is indisposed or with respect to the common object.<sup>47</sup> Thus, a sense can be wrong about its proper object when, say, wine is sweet but tastes bitter owing to an indisposition of the tongue. The erroneous sense "judgment" does not, however, stem not from the fact that the sweetness is tasted *as* bitter, for as Siger has just explained in *QiMD*,

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<sup>45</sup> *QiMD*, IV, q. 34, 230, 98 - 231, 9, my emphasis: "Et ideo quidam exponunt Aristotelem sic, quod ipse intelligat quod circa dulcedinem non mutat iudicium hoc quin iudicet illud esse tale, quale ipsum sentit. Sed hoc non valet, quia ad hoc quod semper eodem modo iudicet de dulcedine, sicut dicit Aristoteles, non tantum oportet quod tale iudicet ipsum quale ipsum sentit, quia non semper ipsum sentit sub eadem qualitate, sed quandoque ut dulce, quandoque ut amarum; sed oportet quod iudicet ipsum tale quale est. Et ideo intelligendum quod, cum gustus iudicat dulce esse amarum, non solum est dulcis, sed etiam amari humoris in lingua existentis: unde, cum sic iudicat, <non> iudicat dulce esse amarum, sed illud cuius est esse iudicat amarum; unde cuius est ipsius dulcis semper eodem modo iudicat, ut ipsum esse dulce." Here is the parallel passage from *QiMM*: "Some interpret this such that in the act of sensation the sense senses the sensible and senses its own act; for it is always right in its judgment of what the sensation is, so that it judges the sensation to be as it considers it, though it does not always judge the sensible (thing) to be as it is. But this is not consonant with Aristotle's text. For he says that the sense never changed once it judged what sweetness is, but is always right about it." Latin text: "Exponunt autem quidam hoc sic, quia in actu sentiendi sensus sentit sensibile et sentit actum suum; semper autem est verus iudicando qualis sensatio sibi fiat, ita quod quale sensationem perpendit talem eam iudicat; non semper autem quale est sensibile, tale ipsum iudicat. Sed huic non consonat littera Aristotelis. Dicit enim quod sensus quale est dulce quando fuerit numquam mutavit, sed semper de ipso verum dicit." *QiMM*, IV, qq. 34 & 35, 183, 99-04.

<sup>46</sup> Siger probably read Aquinas's commentary very closely when he was writing his own commentary. See A. Maurer's remarks in *QiMM*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> *QiMM*, IV, q. 4, 148, 15-20.

IV, q. 34, 230, 98–231, 9, the sense can only taste sweetness as sweet. The sense can also err in attributing the bitterness to the common sensible, in this case the wine – or rather the colored liquid that turns out to be wine. Thus, error in sense-knowledge, for Siger, resides not in confusing mental states with real things, a problem he nowhere envisages, but either in the sense’s sensing the wrong quality or in the attribution of real qualities to the wrong supporting substrate. Nevertheless, the main point Siger seems to be wanting to make in the above passage is that, barring the case of deception and the senses being hindered from functioning normally, my being certain that I taste the wine’s sweetness is also my being certain that the wine is truly sweet.

#### IV

*Siger and the Academics.* The remarkable thing about Siger’s discussion is that he seems to be unworried by what we might feel is the *real* problem of skepticism. For instance, he seems unmoved by cases of perceptual illusions which the Academics had famously pointed to in support of their thesis that veridical appearances are indistinguishable from non-veridical ones.<sup>48</sup>

Their arguments were known to the medievals primarily through Augustine,<sup>49</sup> but Siger as a philosopher working at the Faculty of Arts typically quotes only philosophers, and, as far as I know, does not so much as mention or even allude to Augustine in his writings, and in any case never alludes to the Academics’ argument.<sup>50</sup> The closest he comes to it is in two connected objections against his own position voiced by the skeptical opponent in *I2*.

The first objection is that there is nothing (*nulla re*), that is, no sensible quality, judged to be one way that is not also judged to be otherwise. But if the reason we deem the quality to *be* one way is because it appears that way, then for the same reason we might just as well conclude it to *be* otherwise because it appears otherwise. And as both perceptions cannot be true, we, so argues the skeptic, infer that both are appearances.<sup>51</sup> Now we know that Siger’s answer to that argument is to appeal to the difference between senses more and less worthy of being believed. But the skeptic then goes on to show that that answer is of no avail: “If you say that one ought not with equal reason believe a person who is awake and a person who is asleep, nor a person who is well and one who is ill, one who is wise and one who is unwise, the same argument applies.”<sup>52</sup> Actually, the application of the argument yields somewhat clumsy examples: a person who is deemed to

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<sup>48</sup> The thesis is attributed to Carneades by Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Professors* 7, 159–65), and can be traced back to Arcesilaus (Cicero, *Academica*, 2.77–8). For discussion and presentation of these and other relevant texts, see A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1987), 239–253 and 455–462.

<sup>49</sup> For the Medievals’ knowledge of ancient skepticism, see Pasquale Porro, “Il Sextus latinus e l’immagine dello scetticismo antico nel medioevo,” *Elenchos*, vol. 2 (1994), 229–253.

<sup>50</sup> Of course Augustine was clearly not the only source, and his favorite philosophers, Aristotle and Averroes, abound in relevant examples, for instance in the *de somnis*.

<sup>51</sup> *I2*, 74, 23–26.

<sup>52</sup> *I2*, 74, 27–29: “Quod si tu dicas quod non aequali ratione credendum est vigilanti et dormienti, nec sano et infirmo, nec sapienti et insipienti, eadem ratione arguitur.”

be awake by one observer will be deemed to be asleep by another (!), one judged to be reliable in matters of taste by one observer will be judged not to be by another.<sup>53</sup> The moral however is clear: we cannot appeal to the distinction between more and less worthy senses without begging the question as to what a more or less worthy sense is.

Siger does not actually respond to the skeptic's charge, but his answer can be inferred from he has said previously. If as a matter of fact we do not hesitate between two competing sense reports, if as a matter of empirical fact we do believe our sense deliverances (because we act in conformity with them), then the various scenarios adduced by the skeptics (dream arguments, hallucinations and so forth) are nothing else but sophistry. Although the skeptic's argument in *I2* is not exactly that of the Academics, Siger would probably have felt that the same answer would apply equally well to the Academics' argument. In fact this was exactly the position of a close contemporary's of Siger's, the theologian Henry of Ghent, who explicitly connects arguments close to the ones made by the skeptic in *I2*, 74, 26–28 with those of the Academics and provides the same answer in response to both positions, one that is quite close to that of Siger's, at least on one important point.

The passage in question occurs in Henry's *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum* which contains many quite lengthy discussions devoted to the problem of knowledge.<sup>54</sup> The opening question of the *Summa* asks whether man can know anything. One of the many arguments listed against the possibility of human knowledge is the familiar Aristotelian argument that things appear differently to many observers or appear differently to the same observer at different times; therefore, as all knowledge is based on the senses, there will be no certainty there either.<sup>55</sup>

Henry's answer to this question is roughly the same as Siger's: it is not because the same thing appears differently to one person or to many that the senses are never to be trusted, for something can be perceived determinately by a sense that is not deceived, at the time at which it is not deceived.<sup>56</sup> He then turns to the Academics' argument that "nothing is perceived determinately by (infallible) signs," and finds it wanting for the same reasons.

For what they say is not true that nothing is perceived determinately by signs, and that they <i.e. the signs> do not vouch veridically (*verificant*) for the thing; rather, signs which are the proper sensibles of a particular sense, reveal what they are to the proper sense when it is not deceived or hindered...<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See also *QiMM*, IV, qq. 34–35, 180, 21–27; 181, 38–44.

<sup>54</sup> For a thorough discussion of Henry's doctrine of sense perception and his stance on the question of skepticism, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, vol. 1, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 551–571.

<sup>55</sup> Henry of Ghent, *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, Paris, 1520, a. 1, q. 1, fol. 1rA.

<sup>56</sup> *Summa*, a. 1, q. 1, ad3, fol. 3rG.

<sup>57</sup> *Summa*, a. 1, q. 1, fol. IIIrG: "Non enim verum est dictum eorum quod nihil percipit determinate per signa et quod non verificant de re: immo signa quae sunt propria sensibilia alicuius sensus, id quod sunt ostendunt sensui proprio non decepto nec impedito..."

However, although Henry believes as Siger did that the proper sensibles reveal themselves as they are to the proper sense, he also believes, unlike Siger, that it belongs to the intellect to recognize which sense is not deceived:

Thus, even though the same thing can appear differently to the same observer or to different observers, that is only because of the deception or the impediment of a particular sense which should not be believed in that instance. For a sense that is not deceived should most certainly be believed; which one is such it belongs to the intellect to judge on the basis of many experiences concerning that about which a sense can be deceived or hindered.<sup>58</sup>

Henry reiterates this position in greater detail later on in the *Summa* when responding to the contention that truth cannot be known with certitude without there being features that distinguish it from the false.<sup>59</sup> Henry replies that it is true that there is no specific difference between a veridical sensation and a non-veridical one, in the sense that both are sensations. Thus, the sense of sight is unable to discern between gold and brass. Reason (*ratio*) however transcends the sense and is able to discern the veridical from the illusory.<sup>60</sup> By allowing that there is no specific difference between a veridical sensation and a non-veridical one, Henry seems to want to grant precisely that which Siger adamantly denies, that is that we in some sense do not *intuitively* distinguish between the illusory and the veridical; but what Henry is considering in this later text of the *Summa* is not the problem Siger is most anxious to resolve both in *I2* and in his commentary to the *Metaphysics*, namely the existential certainty regarding the objects of the proper sense, but our knowledge of the common sensible, where Siger is perfectly willing to recognize the sense's fallibility.<sup>61</sup> But although, as we have seen, Siger would have recognized the need, in this latter case, to appeal to reasons taken from a superior power, that is, the intellect, he would also have claimed, if I have understood him correctly, that the intellect's judgement was ultimately based on the testimony of another sense.

## V

*Conclusion.* According to Siger, then, our reasons for believing that things are as they appear, is that they appear that way. That is not to say that all appearances are equally trustworthy. They are only trustworthy when they do not conflict with information that can ultimately be traced back to another sense more worthy of being believed. Siger does not describe the process through which we come to distinguish between more and less trustworthy senses. On the one hand, he seems to incline toward the view that veridical perceptions are in some sense intuitively obvious. On the other hand, much of what he says suggests that their obviousness is only relative to other sense perceptions, which implies that a given deliverance can be deemed veridical only as a

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<sup>58</sup> *Summa*, a. 1, q. 1, fol. IIIrG–H: “Unde et quamvis idem diversimode apparet eidem vel diversis, hoc non est nisi propter deceptionem vel impedimentum alicuius sensus cui non oportet credere in hoc: nec tamen propter hoc dicendum est quod nulli sensui credendum est. Sensui enim non decepto omnino oportet credere: et quis sit talis maxime habet iudicare intellectus ex pluribus experimentationibus praehabitibus circa illa in quibus sensus potest decipi vel impediri.”

<sup>59</sup> *Summa*, a. 1, q. 1, fol. 23vA.

<sup>60</sup> *Summa*, a. 1, q. 1, fol. 24rD.

<sup>61</sup> See *QiMM*, IV, q. 9, 148, 18–19.

result of a process of comparison between different sense reports. What Siger is quite clear about, however, is that, while intellectual knowledge does play some role in that process, it is ultimately the senses themselves that provide the decisive certitude. As Siger puts it in the Commentary on the *Metaphysics*,<sup>62</sup> there is no more persuasive reason for believing something than the fact that the appropriate sense testifies to its existence. If we were to seek another reason we would either come up with a reason that wasn't effective at all or one that was effective only because it told us that something is such because it is sensed as such. Siger's insistence on the primacy of the senses is systematic throughout his epistemological writings and the attention he devotes to the issue and to the reliability of the senses as a means of knowledge suffice to set his commentary apart from that of, say, Aquinas. This insistence on the primacy of the senses might provide a clue to the thesis that the intellect is needed to unmask illusions but not to recognize veridical sense reports: Siger might be pointing to the fact that the senses are veridical by default.

Although, as we have seen, Siger's argument against skepticism is not aimed at the type of skepticism associated with the Academics, this need not be seen as a defect in his position. Because Siger does not frame the problem of sense perception in the terms in which it is couched by the Academics, arguments such as the indistinguishability argument (between dreams and wakeful experiences for example) cannot get off the ground. Whereas the Academic points to the allegedly evident indiscernibility of certain veridical and non-veridical perceptions, one could surmise that Siger might have taken it as equally evident that there is no such indistinguishability. He might have pointed out that our actions show that we do make the requisite distinction between two putatively indistinguishable perceptions. Regrettably, Siger does not comment on the most explicit passage in this regard in chapter 5 of *Metaphysics* IV. In its cryptic Aristotelian formulation, the passage reads thus: "...if someone in Libya believes himself one night in Athens, he does not set off for the Odeon." It is not clear from the wording, as one scholar put it, whether Aristotle means "that *we* know that the dreamer is not in Athens, or that *he* knows."<sup>63</sup> Scholastic commentators however tended to adopt the second reading. Dreamlike experiences and wakeful ones are clearly not indiscernible, not because of some internal feature that immediately labels one as veridical or non-veridical, but because upon awaking the dreamer will act in accordance with his wakeful perceptions, not his dreams, which presupposes that he has the ability to compare both.<sup>64</sup> However, although this general approach could be successful in defusing arguments such as the dream argument, it might be less successful in answering the challenge posed by, say, hallucinations, which, alas, Siger does not discuss.

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<sup>62</sup> *QiMD*, IV, q. 34, 229, 49–54.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Kirwan, *Aristotle's Metaphysics, Books Γ, Δ, and E*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 109.

<sup>64</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *In XII Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, n. 698.