John of Salisbury's skepticism. A veritable *exhortation to prudence (hortamen ad prudentiam)* *

Bogdan Guguianu **

Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to bring up some of John of Salisbury's skeptical theses (1115/20 – 1180) and their impact on the rest of his works. The introduction will deal with the context of the so-called "medieval skepticism", the first part will tackle John of Salisbury's approaches to skepticism, the second part will attempt to connect some concepts in his work to a few ancient skeptics, while the last part will try to concretely identify elements of skepticism in John of Salisbury's theological discourse. Suffice it to say that, in the end, we will draw some conclusions related to the subject. The article's goal is to take notice, without the pretension of being exhaustive, of the polymorphous way in which the epistemologically skeptical attitude of John of Salisbury influenced different aspects of his doctrine.*

Keywords: *academic skepticism, probabilism, medieval skepticism, John of Salisbury, the knowledge of God, Carneades of Cyrene*

Introduction

Starting from the premise that the skepticism is not solely a philosophical doctrine, but also a spiritual state intrinsic to the reasoning itself, it is impossible for us to accept that a doctrine (be it philosophical or theological) could elude, *de plano*, some allegedly skeptical theses.[1]

** CSdr, Al. I. Cuza University of Iași, e-mail bogdan.guguianu@yahoo.com

[1]In this sense, we can take a look at the surprising conclusion of Jean-Luc Marion regarding the precedence of *doubt* over *existence* in a classic author like Descartes, who cannot be accused of skeptical sympathies. („L'existence provient directement du doute […] Car le doute offre la forme la plus libre de pensée, puisqu'il n'énonce aucune proposition, n'engage pas la moindre prédication, n'assume aucune signification, ne vise aucun référent" – J.-L. Marion, *Descartes sous le masque du cartésianisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2021, p.54). Also, Edouard Mehl argues that *doubt* takes the place and role of *thought* insofar as *dubitatio* can seriously and successfully claim the title of "principle of thought" in the first *Meditation*, before thought becomes *cogitatio* in the second *Meditation*: "Omniprésente, la *dubitatio* tient ici la place et le rôle dévolu ailleurs à la *cogitatio*, à tel point que le doute emporte le titre de principe avant même d'être rapporté à la *cogitatio*" (Édouard Mehl, "La question du premier principe

Regarding the possibility of philosophy to follow a skeptical direction, there is no need to insist any further. The activity of skepticism as a doctrine is more than obvious in antiquity, but also in the period of the formation of modernity[2] or even in the contemporary era[3]. Anthologies dedicated to the history of skepticism do not miss from the world of ideas either[4].

A much more serious challenge, however, may be *identifying elements of skepticism in the discourse of medieval Christian theology*, which, through its ideological infrastructure, seems to contradict some principles of philosophical skepticism. The idea of discovering skeptical elements in medieval philosophy[5] is relatively new, and precisely for this reason, it possesses a hermeneutical richness that has not yet been fully revealed.

The difficulty of the task of identifying the presence of skepticism in medieval philosophy stems from the fact that *doubt*, a significant doctrinal constant in the structure of skepticism, not only tends to contradict *faith*, one of the elementary Christian theological virtues, but also threatens, at times, the validity of this essential principle of theological discourse. Even in such conditions, however, medieval theology, although it might have been expected to be more reticent about the controversial current of thought in question, did not shy away from employing skeptical practices or arguments, using them without insisting too much on their origins[6]. In one way or another, skepticism

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dans la *Recherche de la vérité"*, *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, 1991/1, p.83). In spite of a certain tradition that often uses hollow sentences, it must always be remembered that "Descartes, au contraire, ne considère pas le doute des sceptiques (ni le sien) *comme une doctrine, mais comme un acte de pensée*" (our emphasis, B.G) - J.–L. Marion, *op.cit.*, p.21. Doubt is not only the expression of a doctrine, but rather the original state of thought, before any kind of *cogitatio* is uttered. The fact that a canonical writer like Descartes, who is often regarded as the founder of modern philosophical thought, gives *doubt* such an important *architectonic* role (not just a *provisional* or *methodological* one, as it has often been said) should make us aware of the importance of doubt for any kind of thought that takes itself seriously (and we are not only referring to ancient philosophy).

[2] Frédéric Brahami, *Le travail du scepticisme. Montaigne, Bayle, Hume*, Paris, PressesUniversitaires de France, 2001 and M. A. Bernier et S. Charles (dir.)., *Scepticisme et modernité*, Saint-Étienne, Presses de l'Université Saint-Étienne, 2005, but also R. H. Popkin, Ezequiel de Olaso and Giorgio Tonelli(dir.)., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1997.

[3] Keith DeRoseand & Ted A.Warfield (eds.), *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

[4] R. H. Popkinand & J. R. Maia Neto (dirs.) *Skepticism: an Anthology*, Amherst, Prometheus Books, 2007 and Luciano Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus : The Transmission and Recovey of Pyrrhonism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

[5] Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, Brill, 2010.

[6] „Despite this fascination with skeptical arguments, no medieval thinker (with the interesting exception of John of Salisbury, who professed devotion to the Academics in then Prologue to his *Policraticus*) appears to have claimed the mantle of sceptic" - Dallas G. Denery II, Kantik Ghosh, and Nicolette Zeeman (eds.), *Uncertain Knowledge. Scepticism, Relativism, and Doubt in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, p.3.

was omnipresent in the Middle Ages (without being called as such) and always identifiable in the works of *others*, but never in the works of denouncers who branded it dangerous[7]. The distinction between an "internal" and an "external" use of the concept helps us understand why there were no officially recognized "skeptical philosophers" in the Middle ages[8] and why skepticism was only used as a tool within debates: "No one in the Middle Ages was a skeptic in the sense that he claimed that nothing can be known. This was regarded as clearly absurd, and was only used in *reductio* arguments against opponents"[9].

Christophe Grellard devotes a complex study to the phenomenon of the encounter between ancient skepticism and medieval Christianity, evoking the discourse of John of Salisbury as a significant reference in confirming the presence of the *doctrine of neutrality* in Christian theological discourse[10]. Another medieval author who was long included in the same register of using skeptical elements in theological discourse is Nicolas of Autrecourt[11], considered for a long time a true "medieval Hume"[12] because of the arguments he used.

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[7] "Scepticism was, in a sense, everywhere and nowhere, always present in someone else's work, never in one's own. This dynamic, far from producing an unquestioning consensus about the forms and practices of certain philosophical knowledge, actually provided the tools for querying, and in many cases for narrowing, the domain of what could be known with any confidence" – *ibidem*, p. 3.

[8] "An internal use consists in determining what medieval philosophers called skepticism, and to examine who in the Middle Ages accepted such a label. An external use consists in defining a more general notion of skepticism, relevant to what we now call skepticism in modern and contemporary epistemology […] according to an internal use, nobody was a skeptic" – Christophe Grellard, "Nicholas of Autrecourts skepticism: the ambivalence of medieval epistemology", in Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *RethinkingtheHistory of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, ed.cit., p.141.

[9] *Ibidem,* p. 140

[10] See Christophe Grellard, *Jean de Salisbury et la Renaissance Médiévale du Scepticisme*, Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2013.

[11] See "Nicholas of Autrecourt" in James Franklin, *The Science of Conjecture. Evidence and Probability before Pascal*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2015, p. 210 sq.

[12] A characterization that dates back more than a century (H. Rashdall, "Nicholas de Ultricuria, a Medieval Hume", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 7, 1906–1907, 1–27) and which is not entirely false, but neither entirely true, since Nicolas of Autrecourt *openly fought agains academic skepticism*, as he himself confessed in a letter to Bernard d'Arezzo: "Et, ut michi apparet, absurdiora sequuntur ad positionem vestram quam ad positionem Academicorum. Et ideo ad evitandum tales absurditates, sustinui in aula Sorbonne in disputationibus quod sum certus evidenter de obiectis quinque sensuum et des actibus meis." - Nicholas of Autrecourt, *First Letter to Bernard*, § 15, in *His Correspondence withMaster Giles and Bernard of Arezzo*, A Critical Edition and English Translation by L.M.de Rijk, Brill, 1997, pp. 55–56. The label of "skeptic" given to Nicolas of Autrecourt is at least doubtful (if not undeserved) from the perspective of how the 60 theses extracted from his work *Exigit ordo executionis* were condemned by a tribunal convened in Avignon in 1340 (but whose sentence was formalized by Pope Benedict XII only in 1346). This sentence today appears to reveal more *the limits of ecclesiastical censors* (too attached to Aristotelian doctrine) than the heterodoxy of Autrecourt's doctrine: "His particular crime was to show that the arguments of Aristotelian scholasticism are

In this article, we will focus specifically on John of Salisbury, attempting to highlight how he approached certain aspects of his doctrine through the hermeneutical mobilization of some of the ancient skepticism's theses.

1. Means of approaching skepticism in John of Salisbury's work

The general aspects that impose skeptical approaches in medieval theology need to be clearly stated, especially because the type of skepticism present in John of Salisbury's discourse, classified in relation to the most relevant manifestations of this philosophical doctrine (in the ancient period or modernity), proves to be largely reductive. One thing that needs to be understood in this regard is that, if for the ancients skepticism constituted a way of life or skill - δύναμις[13], for John of Salisbury in particular, and for medieval theologians in general, skepticism seems to acquire slight casuistic nuances, possessing a strictly argumentative and epistemological tint, as recent exegesis interprets it[14]. Even under such circumstances, in *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury considers himself part of the academic class[15]. Therefore, it is not

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no more justified than any other arguments, and he showed this very quickly. So quickly that he thought it was a scandal that the masters of Paris spent all their lives studying Aristotle such that « they all deserted moral matters and concern for the common good because of the logical discourses of Aristotle and Averroes » - Richard Fitch, "Nicholas of Autrecourt and the mastery of reason", *Divus Thomas*, 116, 3 (2013), p. 166. R. Fitch summarizes the stakes of the two letters to Bernardo d'Arezzo that were preserved after the burning of Nicolas of Autrecourt's books: "In these letters Nicholas uses powerful negative arguments to show that Aristotelian arguments are no more probable, and provide no more certainty, than many other competent philosophical arguments. All these arguments are thus in a state of equipollence, meaning reason has called its own mastery into question" (*ibidem*, p. 167). The work *Exigit ordo executionis*, considered destroyed by censors but found in a copy at the beginning of the 20th century, has been translated into English: Nicholas of Autrecourt, *The Universal Treatise*, tr. Leonard A. Kennedy, Richard E. Arnold, and Arthur E. Millward, with an Introduction by Leonard A. Kennedy, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1971. For the general context of Autrecourt's condemnation, see J.M.M.H Thijssen's work, *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris, 1200–1400*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp. 73-89, and for Autrecourt's relationship with ancient skepticism one can consult the article by the same author, "The Quest for Certain Knowledge in the Fourteenth Century: Nicholas of Autrecourt against the Academics" in J. Sihvola (ed.), *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition* in Acta Philosophica Fennica, Volume 66, Helsinki, Societas Philosophica Fennica, pp. 199–223.

[13] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 8.

[14] Henrik Lagerlund, *Medieval Scepticism and Divine Deception*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2019, p. 129.

[15] "Academicus vero fluctuat, et quid in singulis verum sit definire non audet. Haec tamen secta trifariam divisa est: habet enim, qui se nihil omnino scire profiteantur, et cautela nimia demeruerunt philosophi nomen. Habet alios, qui se sola necessaria, et per se nota, quae scilicet nesciri non possunt, confiteantur nosse. Tertius gradus, nostrorum est, qui sententiam non praecipitant, in his quae sunt dubitabilia sapienti" (*Metalogicon* IV, 31). For *Metalogicon* we use Ioannes Saresberiensis, *Metalogicon*, ed. J.B.Hall – K.S.B. Keats-Rohan, CCCM ,Brepols, Turnhout, 1991, p. 168, 30–36. English translation: "The Academic, however, wavers. He will not presume to state definitely what is true in each case. His sect of the Academics is divided into three camps. The first group claims to know nothing. By excessive caution, the right to be

by chance that H. Lagerlund considers that this type of skepticism assumed by John of Salisbury is not an original one, but rather one strongly influenced by Cicero's opinion on skepticism[16]. For a theologian like John of Salisbury, the assumption of skepticism as a way of life, and even less so its concrete implementation, was out of the question.

Attempting to emphasize the particularization of research regarding the motives that could have triggered the interest of medieval theologians in skepticism, Henrik Lagerlund argues that the *doctrine of neutrality* imposed its presence in theological discourse especially due to the belief of Christian theologians in God's *infinite power*. Such a hypothesis could be logically justified by the following explanations: given that God possesses infinite power, it is very possible that in some situations he might deceive (*decipere*) humans, who are endowed with so many cognitive limitations[17]. Moreover, a person who claimed to have perfect knowledge even about human things could not sustain their position in relation to divine omnipotence, which could invalidate this order of things (*ordoad invicem*)[18]. The solution to this problem

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called philosophers has been forfeited by some. A second group admits only knowledge of things that are necessary and self-evident, namely, things that one cannot fail to know. A third type of Academics consists in those of us who do not venture to precipitate an opinion concerning questions that are doubtful to a wise man" - John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon* IV, 31, translated with introduction and notes by Daniel McGarry, University of California Press, 1955, p. 251. Christophe Grellard points out that not only for John of Salisbury, but for the Middle Ages in general, scepticism is exclusively neo-academic, since "le pyrrhonisme est quasimentignoré du moyen âge en général et de Jean de Salisbury en particulier" - Christophe Grellard, *Jean de Salisbury. Un cas médiéval de scepticisme*, p.17. Article disponible online. https://www.academia.edu/2502112

[16] „John of Salisbury was influenced by Cicero and he adheres to his own version of Academic skepticism", Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, *ed. cit*., p.10.

[17] However, this fear is more common in the late Middle Ages, when theological systems gave greater weight to absolute divine power as a means of imaginatively exploring possible worlds and their alternative (counterfactual) orders: "The ultimate goal is to determine the necessity or contigency of the case at hand, for which the *absoluta* speculation on possibility and impossibility is simply the means" - W.J. Courtenay, "Thee Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages", in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by T. Rudavsky, Dordrecht, Reidel 1985, p. 255.

[18] For a summary of the first scholastic controversies regarding the relationship between *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata*, see the fundamental work of A. Funkestein, *Theology and scientific imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton University Press, 1986, chapter III. B. 2, and also Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994; William J. Courtenay, "*Covenant and Causality in Pierre d'Ailly*", in *Speculum*, nr. 46/1971, pp. 94-119, and *Capacity and Volition. A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordinated Power*, Bergamo, Pierluigi Lubrina, 1990, pp. 189-191. A classic solution regarding the relationship between the two types of *potentia* can be found in Toma d'Aquino, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.25 and *De potentia*, q.1. For problematizing the interdependence between metaphysics and theology within this relationship between the two *potentiae*, see Olivier Boulnois's article, "*From divine omnipotenceto operative power*", in *Divus Thomas*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (2012, maggio/agosto), pp. 83-97. We remind *en passant* that

will be offered by the concept of *potentia Dei ordinata*, the only one capable of epistemologically orienting the human being within a true but limited knowledge. Therefore, the Christian theologian considered it much wiser to proceed with caution in matters of knowledge, limiting the ambitions of reason[19].

We therefore note that this Christian theological "skepticism" of the medieval period was paradoxically imposed through an act of *acceptance of divine authority*, different from the manner in which the ancient skeptic, committing a bold act of ὕβρις, questioned the universally accepted ideas of his time, practically transforming such an attitude into a veritable *modus vivendi*.

The hermeneutical idea that emerges is that the medieval theologian that made use of skeptical arguments could not completely recycle the ideas consecrated by the skepticism of Antiquity. He only wanted to know the positions of the ancient authors and to use them with *caution*. Reading the texts of pagan authors had to be done, according to John of Salisbury, *fidelioribus ingeniis* ("with a spirit more inclined to faith"), a phrase that will return almost in the same form a few pages later as *fidelis lector et prudens* („faithful and prudent reader")[20]. The same phrase exactly ("lector fidelis et prudens")

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this distinction is launched by Gregory of Rimini (Ariminensis), who considers that it overlaps with an older one, between *divine justice* and *divine power*: „Huic distinction satis concordat alia antiqua, qua dictum est quod quaedam deux non potest de iustitia, quae potest de potentia", Grigore de Rimini, *Lectura super primum et secundum sententiarum,* I, d.42-44, q.1, a2, ed. A. Damasus Trapp OSA and Venicio Marcolino, in *Spätmittelalter und Reformation. Texte und Untersuchungen*, Band 6, Berlin – New York, De Gruyter, 1981. Dominik Perler's article, "Does God deceive us? Skeptical Hypotheses in late Medieval Epistemology" from *Rethinking the History of Skepticism, ed.cit*., pp. 183-185 reviews the fragility of the initial solution offered by Gregory of Rimini and shows how an initial *theological* debate had *epistemological* consequences: "It proved to be the starting point for debates with far-reaching epistemological consequences — debates that centered on the basic oncepts of knowledge and evidence" (p.187).

[19]*Metalogicon*, IV, 41 (English translation, ed. Daniel McGarry, p.272) dedicates a chapter to the interpretation of a verse (from *Ecclesiastes*) starting from the opposition between reason and faith (*Hic quoque illorum audaciam reprimit, qui sollicitantur de omnibus, et volunt de universis reddere ratione,* "The holy writer epresses the audacity of those who stick their nose into everything, and want to account for all things") and making an allusion to those who try to examine rationally and without piety the mystery of the Holy Trinity (*Ecce temeritatem eorum cohibet, qui Deificae Trinitatis arcana, et ea quorum visio in vita aeterna promittitur, irreverenti verbositate discutiunt*, "Note how here strains the rashness of those who, with irreverent garrulity, discuss the secrets of the Divine Trinity and mysteries whose vision is reserved for eternal life"). The translator suggests that the allusion may refer to Abelard: "Reference maybe made here to attempts to rationalize the Divine Trinity, such as those of Abelard in his Theologia Christiana" (*ibid*., p.272, n.508).

[20]*Policraticus*, VII, 10: "et gentiles [libri] simplicioribus periculosius patent: sed in utriusque fidelioribus ingeniis utilissimum est".

appears in *Metalogicon* III, 1, where John of Salisbury explains the manner in which Porphyry should have been read[21].

Moreover, this general problem of the relationship with Antiquity is not specific to John of Salisbury and was not limited to issues related to knowledge. Following in the footsteps of Saint Augustine, who urged the appropriation of those elements from Antiquity that can be useful to a Christian (including philosophical arguments[22]) in the way that the Jews took the gold of the Egyptians when leaving the kingdom of captivity, the theologian must also know how to take everything that can be good from pagan culture. In this sense, John of Salisbury evokes in *Policraticu*s the biblical episode referred to by Saint Augustine, showing that the Christian must also learn from the enemy: " licet et ab hoste doceri sapientis animus non detrectet, cum peculiaris populous Dei auro argento uestibus et toto Egiptiorum ornatu resplendeat"[23].

2. The skeptical influence model

A very brief demonstration will allow us to understand what discursive landmarks John of Salisbury borrows from the complexity of ancient philosophical skepticism. Let's see, therefore, what this controversial school of thought represented for an ancient philosopher:

> „Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquillity."[24]

We can identify from this definition of skepticism three important elements, three identifying marks of the *neutrality doctrine*: the *equipollence*

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[21] "Quidquid autem litterae facies indicat, lector *fidelis et prudens* interim veneretur ut sacrosanctum, donec ei alio docente, aut Domino revelante, veritas plenius et familiarius innotescat" (English translation: "A trustworthy and prudent lecturer will respect as inviolable the evident literal meaning of what is written, until he obtains a fuller and surer grasp of the truth by further reading or by divine revelation" - John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* III, 1 transl. Daniel McGarry, pp. 148).

[22] "Philosophi autem qui vocantur, si qua forte vera et fidei nostrae accomodata dixerunt, maxime Platonici, non solum formidanda non sunt sed ab eis etiam tamquam ab iniustis possessoribus in usum nostrum vindicanda" – "Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them" - Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2.40.60, edited and translated by R.P.H. Green Oxford, 1995, pp. 124.

[23] „. . .although the soul of the wise man does not refuse to learn even from the enemy, since the special people of God glitter in the golden clothing and silver ornaments of all the Egyptians" – *Policraticus,* VII, 1 (transl. Cary J. Nederman, p. 149).

[24] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, edited by Julia Annasand Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 4.

in the opposed objects and accounts, the *suspension of judgement* and the *tranquillity*. In terms of Greek philosophy, these three elements correspond to the following concepts: ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων, ἐποχή and ἀταραξία. We will not dwell on the method by which philosophical skepticism mobilizes all these concepts doctrinally. The fact that in philosophical skepticism the three identifying marks are determined chronologically (and etiologically) is deducible from the very concise definition previously presented. This conceptual triad theoretically (and practically) strengthens the structure and integrity of skepticism as a philosophical doctrine. If we were to accept that in medieval theological discourse skepticism exclusively targets epistemological issues (as Hagerlund claims), we cannot ignore the fact that this discourse perhaps retains only the first stage of this triad, namely ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων[25]. Even though John of Salisbury ignores the other two essential stages in the doctrinal architecture of philosophical skepticism (ἐποχή and ἀταραξία), it cannot be asserted that he truly supports the first one (ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων) in the ancient sense of the term. In this sense, we must refer to the definition of the first principle given by Sextus Empiricus: "By 'equipollence' we mean equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing."[26]

We see from this definition that for an ancient skeptic, the first principle (equipollence) is extremely important, carrying with it an obligation of *neutrality*: the skeptic must be *equidistant* with both *probability* and *improbability*. Moreover, not only in relation to these two limits must he show equidistance, but in any situation where two or more theses are contradictory. In the view of a skeptic, a thesis can receive valid contrary arguments and vice versa. However, it is quite clear that John of Salisbury does not admit such a principle: the one for which two contrary theses are equally probable cannot prove anything, claims the medieval theologian[27]. Equipollence, however, represents according to some modern exegetes, the very foundation of skepticism[28]. John of Salisbury privileges aspects related to *probability* only at a *theoretical* level, thus following a type of skepticism closest to the view of Carneades of Cyrene. The fact that the theologian justifies his skeptical view by appealing to the doctrine of the Academic philosophers, and in particular to aspects related to probabilism, is demonstrable through his own testimonies.: „Being an Academician in matters that are doubtful to a wise man, I cannot

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[25] „Obviously, much more can be said about the Pyrrhonian approach to scepticism, but it is clear right from the start that there was nothing like this in the Latin Middle Ages, that is, there was no scepticism with the aim of the *suspension of judgment* and *tranquillity*" - Henrik Lagerlund, *Medieval Scepticism and Divine Deception*, pp. 128-129 (our emphasis, B.G.)

[26] Sextus Empiricus, ed.cit., p. 5.

[27] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VII, 7.

[28] Leo Groarke, *Greek Scepticism. Anti Realist Trends in Ancient Thought*, McGill Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kinsgton/London/Buffalo, 1990, p. 31.

swear to the truth of what I say. Whether such propositions may be true or false, I am satisfied with probable certitude."[29]

Academics (including Carneades) certainly made concrete use of two of the three principles of philosophical skepticism, namely ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων and especially ἐποχή, and this is confirmed by enough bibliographic sources[30]. Given that he studied Cicero, the medieval theologian seems to have known that Carneades' philosophical skepticism did not involve glorifying probabilism. The principle of probabilism was for Carneades a criterion for *practical* guidance, one that would allow him to act when equipollence "blocked" his way[31]. Moreover, John of Salisbury seems to ignore the fact that this academic philosopher valued ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων to its fullest extent, as demanded by the attitude of a true sceptical philosopher. John of Salisbury retains only the *one-sided nuance of probabilism* from the philosophical scepticism of Antiquity, which is indebted to the method of Carneades. It is also noteworthy that this particular nuance is manifested in the text of the medieval theologian primarily at a *theoretical* level and less so at an *applied* level.

John of Salisbury's preference for this type of skepticism, however, is not purely random or accidental. It has already been confirmed by exegetes that serious suspicions of dogmatism, or at least in terms of its anticipation, have been cast upon Carneades' assumed skepticism [32]. Carneades thus consolidated the path towards *belief*[33]*,* a strikingly similar concept to that of *faith*. Philo of Larissa and Antiochus of Ascalon, both philosophy professors of Cicero [34], continued with great dedication this direction, transforming skepticism into a kind of academic dogmatism[35] and coming to be considered by Enesidem not skeptical philosophers, but Stoics quarreling with other Stoics[36]. The levels of probability established by the philosopher Carneades were able to endorse the power of belief to an extremely relevant extent, bringing probability almost to the status of legitimacy. In the philosopher's view, the degrees of probability are three: 1 - a thing may be *plausible*, 2 - *plausible* and empirically *investigable*, 3 – *plausible, empirically investigable,*

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[29] John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* (transl. Daniel D. McGarry, p. 6, *Prologue*).

[30] See Diogenes Laertios, IV, 28, Lactantius, *DivinaeInstitutiones*, V, 14, Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Ad Atticum*, XIII, 21, Eusebius de Cesareea, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 14.8.2, 9–10.

[31] Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, Routledge, London & New York, 2009, pp.78-81.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 82.

[33] Harald Thorsrud, „Arcesilaus and Carneade" in Richard Bett, *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010. p. 71: „On the first, dialectical interpretation, Carneades merely expands the scope of Arcesilaus' method, but continues to promote universal *epochê*. On the second, fallibilist interpretation, Carneades restricts the scope of *epochê*, allowing for some, *fallible beliefs*."

[34] See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Brutus*, 306 și *Varro* I, 14.

[35] Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, p. 86.

[36] Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 212, 170a 15-16.

and uncontradicted[37]. John of Salisbury demonstrates that he takes into account cognitive approaches of this kind: „Or, as we put it above, many sensations, or sometimes even only one, result in a memory, many memories in an experimental proof, many experimental proofs in a rule, and many rules in an art, which provides scientific skill."[38] The mentioned aspect, however, does not prove that the Christian theologian *confirms* this theory in any way, but rather that he expresses his trust in academic philosophy and admits this based on the theorization of probabilities and their ability to lead one to the acquisition of truth.:"It is not useless to be in doubt about particular things; and in regard to such matters the Academics had entered into debate about probabilities, until they finally grasped the truth."[39]

Academic philosophers could thus be worthy models to follow in certain matters related to knowledge. John of Salisbury, in fact, urges caution in several places, recommending that their ideas be followed:

> „Since this science both dispels the shadows of ignorance, and illumines its possessor with the privilege of foreknowledge, it has frequently served [as a lamp] to guide from darkness to light the school of the Academicians, with whom we [frankly] profess our agreement on questions that remain doubtful to a wiseman."[40]

Another example of acknowledging the principles of academic skepticism is the following quote:

> „But Academics, evading the precipice of falsehood, are more modest in these sorts of matters because they hardly disavow their defects and, in a position of ignorance about things, they are entirely uncertain about each one. This is by far more secure, of course, than to decide upon uncertainties rashly."[41]

When it comes to the knowledge of God, John of Salisbury does not appeal to the methods of academic probabilism, clearly rejecting the principles of demonstrative knowledge: „Indeed, there is one principle of all religions

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[37] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 227 (English translation, ed.cit., p. 60: "Further, we say that appearances are equal in convincingness or lack of convincingness (as far as the argument goes), while they say that some are plausible and others implausible. Even among the plausible ones they say there are differences: some, they think, really are just plausible, others plausible and inspected, others plausible and scrutinized and undistractable").
[38] John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, IV, 12 (transl. Daniel McGarry, p. 222). The aspect can also be noticed in correlation with the Aristotelian view captured in *Posterior Analytics* II, 100 a5, which John of Salisbury might have drawn inspiration from.
[39] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VII, 7 (transl. Cary J. Nederman, p. 156)
[40] John Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, IV, 7 (transl. Daniel McGarry, p. 213).
[41] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VII, 1 (transl. Cary J. Nederman, p. 149)

which piety concedes freely and *without any demonstration*, namely, that God is powerful, wise, good, worthy of respect and loving."[42]

3. „Skepticism" and Aristotelism
The way in which the medieval theologian perceives academic skepticism, as well as the category of skeptical philosophers in which he himself belongs, must be brought back to attention.:

> „The Academician, however, wavers. He will not presume to state definitely what is true in each and every case. His sect [of the Academicians] is divided into three camps. By excessive caution, the right to be called philosophers has been forfeited [by some]. A [second] group admit only knowledge of things that are necessary and self-evident, namely, things that one cannot fail to know. A third type [of Academicians] consists in those of us who do not [venture to] precipitate an opinion concerning questions that are doubtful to a wise man."[43]

The so-called "questions that are doubtful to a wise man" designate a sphere that is quite ambiguous in the discourse in question, since John of Salisbury believes that human reason is ennobled by divine reason, and the cultivation of reason is an obligation that allows for "understanding God's plan related to this world":

> "Since our reason is ennobled by its divine origin, and powerful with a divine activity, all philosophy agrees that the cultivation of reason should be our primary concern. For reason curbs unruly impulses, and brings everything into conformity with the norms of goodness. Nothing that agrees with reason is out of harmony with God's plan. In obedience to the Divine mind, one will move through his allotted span of life making happy progress"[44].

The cultivation of reason allows not only the avoidance of sensory errors (which are deceiving[45]) and the knowledge of things in this world but

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[42] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VII, 7, (transl. Cary J. Nederman, p. 155)

[43] John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, IV, 31 (transl. Daniel McGarry, p. 251)

[44] „Cum ergo ratio origine divina nobilitetur, et divino polleat exercitio, eam super omnia colendam esse, totius philosophiae decreto sancitum est. Haec enim inordinatos motus compescit, et ad normam bonitatis componit universa, ut nihil sit quod ordinationi divinae repugnet, cui si quis obtemperat, felici processu peraget aevum" - John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* IV, 17 (transl. Daniel McGarry, pp. 228-229).

[45] "Et quia sensuum examinatrix est, qui ob fallendi consuetudinem possunt esse suspecti" ("Since reason examines our sensations, which, because they are wont to deceive us, are subject to suspicion" – *ibid.,* p. 229)

also has a crucial role in *understanding eternal truths*: "Thus when love of reason, which concerns earthly things, ascends with prudence to the hidden secrets of eternal and divine truths, it becomes transformed into wisdom, which is in a way exempt from mortal limitations"[46].

However, the reader must be attentive to the distinction in the following chapter between *intellectus* and *ratio*, which emphasizes that reaching the highest level of knowledge (*intellectus*) is not a mere effect of exercising reason (*ratio*), but rather an entirely different regime of knowledge, an *intuitive* one (while reason has a *preparatory-operational* regime): "Nam intellectus assequitur, quod ratio investigat: si quidem in labores rationis intrat intellectus, et sibi ad sapientiam thesaurizat quod ratio praeparans acquisivit"[47]. In order to prevent the mistaken idea that the intuitive regime (*intellectus*) of the human mind could confer access to *divine* truths, John of Salisbury points out that it can only reach the "divine reasons of [worldly] *things*" that are "naturally perceptible". [48]. Beyond this limit, however, intellectual knowledge cannot extend its powers to divine things. Only in exceptional cases, through divine grace, can it reach *some* divine truths.: „And there are some divine truths, in like manner, which become either more fully or less fully known to us, according to the decree of the divine dispensation"[49],

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[46] *Ibid.,* p. 230. Original Latin text: "Quia cum prudentia, quae de terrenis est, et rationis amor, ad incorruptae veritatis, divinorumque arcana consurgit, in sapientiam transiens, quodammodo a mortalium conditione eximitur".

[47] Translation-interpretation into English marks the difficulty of this distinction for a modern person.: "For [intuitive] understanding actually attains what reason investigates. [Intuitive] Understanding enters into the very labors of reason, and treasures up the preparatory gains of reason unto wisdom" (*ibidem,* p.230).

[48] "et divinas penes se causas habet omnium rationum, naturaliter sibi perceptibilium" (English translation: "it also contemplates the divine causes behind all reasons within the natural powers of its perception" – *ibidem*, p.230). We can suspect in this fragment and in the previous ones where the contemplation of the ideas of things is mentioned the Augustinian influence from *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* (q. 46, called *Of Ideas*), where Augustine talks about the divine nature of ideas and even quotes Plato: "Quod si hae rerum omnium creandarum creatarumve rationes divina mente contineantur, neque in divina mente quidquam nisi aeternum atque incommutabile potest esse, *atque has rationes rerum principales appellat ideas* Plato, non solum sunt *ideae*, sed ipsae verae sunt, quia aeternae sunt et eiusdem modi atque incommutabiles manent" (CCSL 44A, XLVI.72-73.57-62, our emphasis, B.G).

[49] *Ibidem,* p. 231. Latin text: „Et nonnullae aliis plus aut minus, pro divinae dispensationis decreto, innotescunt" (VI, 18). What draws attention in this fragment is the use of the phrase *divinae dispensationis*, which is the Latin equivalent of the Greek term οἰκονομία (divine economy or the attitude of God who performs various actions in favor of humans). The Greek term οἰκονομία had already been translated as *dispensatione* by Tertullian: "unicum quidem deum credimus, sub hac tamen dispensatione, quam οἰκονομία dicimus" - Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2. 1-4; CCL 2, pp. 1160-1161. The most probable source of the term in John of Salisbury is St. Augustine, who already used the tradition of equating the Greek term "οἰκονομία" with the term *dispensationis* (see *inter alia*, *De vera religione* 7, 13 and 34, 128). The fact that it is not a random phrase in John of Salisbury is proven by the presence of two more identical occurrences in *Policraticus* ("multis et uariis *pro dispensatione diuina* afflicti temporibus, saepeque sunt clamantes ad Dominum liberati" - It is about the chosen people who

but the general rule is that divine reasons ("divinas rationes") *exceed the human and even angelic capacity to intuit them*: "For there are some divine reasons which utterly exceed, not merely human, but even angelic comprehension"[50].

It might be better to understand things as follows: in matters related to the knowledge of what exceeds the material world, the philosopher must appeal to faith or revealed truths, and *probabilism must be exclusively confined to human affairs*. Thus, it becomes easier to understand the passages in which John of Salisbury acknowledges his own *inadequacy in adopting skepticism*.

What concretizes perhaps the most relevant aspect that John of Salisbury doesn't always follow the natural impulse of the medieval theologian to appeal to faith or revelation can be observed in the way he uses epistemic models of other ancient philosophers in matters of knowledge (where Augustine's theory of illumination was used in the early Middle Ages), departing from skepticism. In general, it's about the anchoring in Aristotelianism (as it was known then through Boethius). We can take as a suggestive example in this sense the passage in which John of Salisbury argues that genera and species are "mental representations of actual, natural things, intellectual images of the mutual likenesses of real things, reflected, as it were, in the mirror of the soul's native purity"[51]. In order to be able to delimit them conceptually, John of Salisbury even uses the transliterated Greek term ("These concepts the Greek call *ennoyas* or *yconoyfanas*"), considering them clearly discernible by the human mind ("that is to say images of things clearly discernible by the mind"[52]). Mental images or exemplars (models of things) exist in the mind[53], but they do not have an ontological reality of their own, such as the Platonic ideas:

> "According to Aristotle, these exemplars are conceptual, and are, as it were, images and shadows of things that really exist. But if one attempts to lay hold of them, supposing them to have an existence of their own, apart from particular things, they vanish [into thin air] as do dreams. For they are representations apparent only to the intellect"[54].

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are often punished by God "by divine economy", VIII, 20; „quia diuinae dispensationi reluctari non audet" - it is about a man of the Church who did not dare to oppose "God's plan", VIII, 23) and in *Metalogicon* (besides the previously cited occurrence, there is another one in I, 41: "Homo enim ad exsequendum *divinae dispensationis* effectum").

[50] *Ibidem*, p. 231. Latin text: „Sunt enim quae exsuperant omnem sensum, tam hominum, quam angelorum, divinae rationes".

[51] *Metalogicon*, II, 20 (transl. Daniel McGarry, p. 121). See also *Metalogicon* IV, 20: "Reason's activity, whereby it seeks and finds in its processes the ideas of things, which the Greeks call *ennoias* … (transl. Daniel McGarry, p. 232).

[52] *Ibidem*.

[53] *Ibidem*: "The exemplar of what is defined exists in the mind, while the example exists among actual things".

[54] The translator notes that John of Salisbury fully adopts Aristotle's criticism of Platonic ideas ("Here John follows the translation of Aristotle's *An. Post.*, i, 22, 83 a, 33, concerning Platonic

John of Salisbury's appropriation of Aristotle's criticism of Plato can be explained by the fact that, like all his contemporaries[55], he had an extremely limited knowledge of Plato, only having access to Calcidius' partial translation of *Timaeus*[56], quotes from *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Laws* found in Cicero[57] and general elements of Platonism found in Apuleius' *De Platone et eius dogmate*[58].

Here is what the Christian theologian says regarding the problem of the *real existence* of universals:

„Nothing can be universal unless it is found in particular things. Despite this, many have sought to fiind the universal, in itself, apart from individual things. But at the end of their search, they have all come out empty-handed. For the universal, apart from particular things, is not an entity, unless perhaps in the sense that truths and like meanings of combined words are entities."[59]

Even if we were to accept some slight notes of skeptical attitude in the sights of John of Salisbury, we must admit that this is ultimately a dogmatic perspective, one that a genuine skeptic would never accept, preferring rather to suspend judgment in theorizing about such matters.

There will still remain and other problematic issues, at least in relation to the possible acceptance of the Academic philosophers theses by the medieval theologian. We can ask ourselves, for example, whether John of Salisbury knew that Carneades, the representative par excellence of probabilistic skepticism, had made extremely significant contributions precisely in *contesting* the possibility of human beings knowing divinity and understanding its role in the order of the world[60]? For even if we have observed that John of Salisbury can tangentially accept certain skeptical views correlated with the ideas of Carneades, it is still unlikely that he would accept such things. Truths of this kind should not even be questioned from John of Salisbury's point of view: „And he who places in question whether God exists, and whether

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ideas, which is attributed to Boethius, *Post. Anal. Interpr.*, chap. 18 (in Migne, P.L., LXIV, 733). – *ibid.,* p. 121, n.349)

[55] Michel Lemoine, "La tradition indirecte du Platon latin" in Roger Ellis (ed.), *The Medieval Translator. Proceedings of the International Conference Held at Conques*, Turnhout, 1993, pp. 337–346.

[56] Which is quoted in *Entheticus*, ll, 937–1088 and in *Policraticus* VII, 5,

[57] Cicero, *De officiis* 1, 15; *De finibus* 2, 52.

[58] See Christophe Grellard's indications, *Jean de Salisbury et la Renaissance Médiévale du Scepticisme,* ed.cit.*,* p. 32.

[59]*Metalogicon*, II, 20 (transl. Daniel McGarry, p. 123).

[60]Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, Routledge, London & New York, pp. 62-65.

this same power is wise or good, is not only irreligious but treacherous, and is deservedly instructed by the lesson of punishment."[61]

Conclusions

It is clear that the idea of *prudence* appealed to the Christian theologian, as he himself confirms and praises the qualities of such an attitude necessary in discovering the *truth*[62]. The fact that John of Salisbury assumed a *strange* type of skepticism, whose doctrinal characteristics are lax, contradictory, and difficult to classify, is attested to in other very recent studies[63]. Thus, John of Salisbury's skepticism is fragmentary (as we have seen, he only takes certain concepts from ancient skepticism and practically limits their area of use), but even in these conditions, we can still consider it, following David Bloch's suggestion[64], a type of *optimistic skepticism*.

This idea of prudence, or more accurately, the exhortation to prudence (*hortamen ad prudentiam*), we believe is the thesis that can characterize, at least intentionally, the skepticism of an author who is still insufficiently popularized.

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[61]John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VII, 7(transl. Cary J. Nederman, pp. 153-154).
[62]"Since the subject matter of prudence is truth (for prudence is concerned with comprehending the truth), the ancients conceived of Prudence and Truth as sisters, related by a divine consanguinity. Thus perfect prudence needs must contemplate the truth, from which nothing can separate it" (*Metalogicon*, IV, 14, transl. Daniel McGarry, p.224)
[63] David Bloch, „John of Salisbury's Skepticism", in Diego E. Machuca, Baron Reeds (eds.), *Skepticism. From Antiquity to Present*, Bloomsbury, London/New York, 2018, p. 186.
[64]*Ibidem*, p. 193.

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