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VIVARIUM 61 (2023) 318–359

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# The Noblest Complexion

## *Semimaterialist Tendencies in a Late Medieval Bohemian Reading of John Wyclif*

Lukáš Lička | ORCID: 0000-0001-8765-088X

Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, Prague, Czech Republic

licka@flu.cas.cz

Received 21 October 2021 | Accepted 27 January 2023 |

Published online 24 October 2023

### Abstract

This article examines an uncommon materialist argument preserved in late medieval Prague quodlibets by Matthias of Knín (1409) and Prokop of Kladruba (1417). The argument connects the Galenic claim that the human body has the noblest and best-balanced complexion possible with the Alexandrist claim that the human rational soul emerges from such well-balanced matter without any supernatural intervention. Of the various medieval renderings of these claims, John Wyclif's *De compositione hominis* is singled out as the most probable source of the argument. Far from attributing plain materialism to Wyclif, the article highlights a semimaterialist position, mentioned in two fifteenth-century *De anima* commentaries of Prague origin, grafting the immortal spirit postulate onto an Alexandrist-like doctrine of the intellect as educed from the harmoniously complexioned body. Finally, it is argued that this semimaterialist position may not only encapsulate how Bohemian masters read Wyclif, but also be close to Wyclif's actual anthropological stance.

### Keywords

complexion – materialism – human soul – medieval Prague university – John Wyclif – Matthias of Knín – Prokop of Kladruba

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on a peculiar argument employing the notion of the noblest complexion to make a case for a materialist view of human nature. Three different articulations of this argument re-emerge in the repositories of arguments stemming from two quodlibets held at the faculty of arts of the University of Prague and presided over by the Bohemian masters Matthias of Knín in 1409 and Prokop of Kladruby in 1417. The argument proposes that as the human body is endowed with the noblest complexion possible in this world, the noblest form (the human rational soul) springs from such well-balanced matter.<sup>2</sup> It entails (and the Prague *quodlibetarii* frame it so) a materialist view of human nature: the explanation of neither the process of human generation nor the metaphysical structure of the human being requires any supernatural or immaterial element. This piece of reasoning is therefore referred to as the “materialist argument” (MA) throughout the article.

Importantly, the label “materialist” is here used in a narrow sense for a specific position in the tradition of Aristotelian anthropology. It pertains to the issue of human generation and metaphysical composition, and instead of implying a reduction of, e.g., cognitive functions to workings of matter, it elaborates the notion of the education of the human soul from matter. Such materialism thus postulates that the human (rational) soul is (1) the substantial form inhering in the human body, and (2) a material form similar (univocal) to the forms of ordinary (physical) objects and thus, for example, produced by education from the potentiality of matter. Historically, Latin scholars, elaborating on Averroes’s account, often ascribed this position to Alexander of Aphrodisias, interpreting his notion of the possible intellect emerging from harmonious matter as the human rational soul.<sup>3</sup> When defined in this way, materialism does

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1 Work on this study received financial support from the Czech Science Foundation (GA ČR) project “Philosophy at the University of Prague around 1409: Matěj of Knín’s *Quodlibet* as a Crossroads of European Medieval Knowledge,” grant no. 19–16793S, carried out at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences. I am indebted to Chiara Beneduce and Paul Bakker, the organisers of the *Complexio* conference (Nijmegen, February 2021), for their comments on an earlier version of this article. The text has also benefited from suggestions made by two anonymous reviewers for *Vivarium* and a piece of advice by Fabrizio Bigotti.

2 This argument was briefly presented in Lička, “Buridan Wycliffised?,” 291–292. The aim here is to examine the argument itself, its intellectual background, and its potential merits for interpreting John Wyclif’s anthropology and its reception among Bohemian philosophers.

3 Nevertheless, Alexander’s actual position (and even Averroes’s interpretation) was far less naturalistic or at least much more nuanced than most Latin medieval scholars thought. For details, see Brenet, “Alexandre d’Aphrodise.”

not necessarily deny supernatural principles in general, e.g., immaterial forms outside the human being; for example, Alexander (like other Peripatetics) postulated the agent intellect as separate and identical to God.

Further, the argument employs the concept of complexion, inherited from Galenic medicine, in a specific way. Generally, the complexion is a quality resulting from the mutual activity and passivity of the primary qualities of the four elements blended in a material mixture.<sup>4</sup> Although a quality, the notion of complexion encompasses some features connected with the notion of substance: it can be considered a defining (individual or general) property of an individual entity or whole species.<sup>5</sup> Avicenna, discussing the respects in which a complexion attains an equilibrium, implies that the complexion can be (1) a general property of the human species, (2) an individual property of an individual body or (3) an individual organ, or (4) a general property of a certain organ as typical for a particular species. It can also be (5) an ideal property of an individual body identical to the state of health. Even climates (geographical regions) have their complexions and, consequently, the complexion can be (6) a general property of members of a nation derived from the climatic and environmental conditions of the region they inhabit.<sup>6</sup>

Insofar as medieval medical authors aimed at reaching or re-establishing the patient's state of health, they dealt with the complexion as an individual property of a particular human body or an organ ([2], [3], [5]). However, both medieval physicians and natural philosophers also elaborated on the most general case (1) of the complexion as an attribute of the entire human species. In this context, they often advocated the Galenic claim that humans have a more balanced complexion than any other animal, plant, or inanimate body, rendering it the most perfect, balanced, or noblest in nature.<sup>7</sup> The present article focuses on how medieval authors designed (and reacted to) the potential inference from the Galenic "noblest complexion" to the bold Alexandrist mate-

4 See, e.g., Avicenna, *Liber canonis* I, fen 1, doct. 3, c. 1, 4<sup>r</sup>B: "Complexio est qualitas, quae ex actione ad invicem et passione contrariorum qualitatum in elementis inventarum ... provenit." See also Kaye, *A History*, ch. 3–4, esp. 144–150, 165–174, 189–195.

5 Some modern interpreters understand the complexion as a substantial quality; see Chandelier and Robert, "Nature humaine," 479–485, and Beneduce, "Personalized Medicine," 95–97.

6 Avicenna, *Liber canonis* I, fen 1, doct. 3, c. 1, 4<sup>r</sup>C–4<sup>v</sup>G; see also Chandelier and Robert, "Nature humaine," 492–499.

7 Galen, *De complexionibus* I, c. 6, 29<sup>vb</sup>; and II, c. 1, 31<sup>vb</sup>: "... homo est temperatoris complexionis reliquis animalibus. Et non ... animalibus tantum, sed est temperator plantis etiam et reliquis corporibus." See also the passage from Avicenna cited in note 34 and Köhler, *Homo*, 1: 325–326, for the medieval aftermath of this claim. On two conceptions of complexional balance, see note 16.

rialist claim about the origin of human intellect. The materialist argument posed by Prague *quodlibetarii* embodies such a move, and the aim of this article is to reconstruct the theoretical and historical framework in which it was posed.

After examining the versions and theoretical implications of the MA, various medieval conceptualisations of the human soul's dependence on the degree of the organisation of matter are outlined (Sections 2 and 3). Some notions employed in the MA (e.g., harmonious complexion, ontological nobility, intellect as educed from matter) may have been influenced by Latin reports of Alexander of Aphrodisias's position, usually derived from Averroes's account of it. Furthermore, several arguments from Algazel, Albert the Great, and Matthew of Aquasparta, structurally resembling the MA, are considered but excluded as possible candidates for being the source of the MA. Finally, John Wyclif's *De compositione hominis* is singled out as the most likely source both doctrinally and historically.

Should the MA have supported plain materialism? From a historical point of view, it was arguably connected with a more modest position, called "semimaterialism" here. Like the materialism defined above, semimaterialism encompasses the claim that the human rational soul is educed from matter and inhering in the human body as its form. Contrary to materialism, however, it allows for the existence of an extra ingredient in the human being that is immaterial and infused from outside, e.g., a created spirit providing personal immortality but not serving as a form of the human body. This semimaterialist position also differs from Averroism, as the spirit coming from outside is not a single intellect shared by all humans but an individual entity.<sup>8</sup> Section 4 introduces two fifteenth-century Bohemian *De anima* commentaries, one ascribed to Alexander of Trebovia, the other newly identified and anonymous, mentioning precisely this position (albeit in a highly encapsulated form). I suggest that the semimaterialist position represents some Bohemian scholars' interpretation of John Wyclif's anthropology, the materialist part of which the MA was intended to justify.

Finally, section 5 inquires into John Wyclif's view on human nature, as found in his *De compositione hominis* and *Triologus*, and suggests that the semimate-

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8 On Latin elaborations of the Averroist metaphysics of human beings, see, e.g., Brenet, "Averroism," and the literature referred to there. The label "semimaterialist" was applied to Thomas Aquinas's cognitive theory in Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas*, 59. However, this "semimaterialism" is not a position pertaining to the issue of the metaphysical structure of human beings but to the ontology of cognition, and thus differs considerably from the position investigated here.

rialist reading may be plausible, or at least, may reveal some intriguing aspects neglected by contemporary scholarship. A call is made for Wyclif to be included into the history of conceptualisations of how the human soul may be both derived from the body's material organisation and separable from it.

## 2 The Materialist Argument by Late Medieval Prague *quodlibetarii*

This article's starting point is a peculiar argument preserved in the materials connected to two quodlibetal disputations held at the late medieval Prague Faculty of Arts. These two disputations were organised by the Bohemian masters Matthias of Knín (Matthias de Knin) in 1409 and Prokop of Kladruby (Procopius de Cladrub) in 1417. The quodlibetal materials are extant in two slightly later fifteenth-century manuscript copies.<sup>9</sup> Both quodlibetal volumes contain *quaestiones*, each of which was intended for another respondent from the ensemble of faculty masters. The volumes are not collections of *determinationes* by individual masters assembled after the disputation; most of the questions consist only of *pro* and *contra* arguments. Thus, modern scholarship usually interprets such volumes as “handbooks” of the *quodlibetarii*, repositories prepared beforehand for disputation with the responding masters.<sup>10</sup>

All three articulations of the MA occur within these preparatory sets of arguments. These three versions of the argument share a similar structure and the blatantly materialist conclusion that the human intellect is educed from matter. However, they differ in detail. Employing the same materialist argument, Knín and Kladruby argue for or against three different claims. In question 40 of Knín's quodlibet, the argument is incorporated into broader reasoning aimed against the human soul's indivisibility and immateriality: the human soul is divisible as it is a material form. Knín justifies the soul's alleged materiality both by Alexander of Aphrodisias's authority and by the MA: (1) a nobler agent brings about a nobler mixture in the matter and a nobler complexion or harmony

9 See Matthias of Knín, *Quodlibet*. Praha, Knihovna metropolitní kapituly, MS L. 45, 1<sup>r</sup>–156<sup>v</sup>, and Prokop of Kladruby, *Quodlibet*. Praha, Knihovna metropolitní kapituly, MS L. 27, 1<sup>r</sup>–132<sup>r</sup>. All transcriptions of the manuscript sources below have been made by the author of this article unless otherwise indicated.

10 On the specificities of Prague artistic quodlibetal disputations see, e.g. Kejř, *Kvodlibetní disputace*; Kocánová, “The Sublunary Phaenomena”; Pavlíček, “Parisian and Prague *Quodlibeta*,” 328–340; Lička, “Studying,” 259–268, 271–283; Lička, “Buridan Wycliffised?,” 280–288. On Matthias of Knín, see Campi, “Is Perfection of this World?,” and Campi, “*Quaestio* on Friendship.” For Prokop of Kladruby, see Spunar, *Repertorium*, 1: 352–362.