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John Pecham



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Abstract

John Pecham (c. 1225–1292), Doctor Ingeniosus, was born c. 1225 in Patcham near Brighton. He pursued his early studies under the tutelage of the Benedictine monks at the Cluniac abbey at Lewes. He joined the Franciscans sometime between 1250 and 1256 and was sent to Paris to pursue his theological studies. He became regent master at the University of Paris in 1270–1271. From there, he returned to England where he was regent master at the University of Oxford from 1272 to 1275. He was elected minister provincial of the English friars in 1275 and subsequently became lector at the Papal Curia from 1277 to 1279 when he was made Archbishop of Canterbury on January 28, 1279, occupying England's primatial see until his death on 8 December 1292.

In his theory of knowledge, Pecham upheld the need for divine illumination regarding the first principles of veracity and morality, although this influence is not consciously experienced. In opposition to Aquinas, he maintained that the intellect (human, angelic, and divine) had direct

and immediate knowledge of singulars. The intellect, he said, abstracts the universal from the singular either knowingly or unknowingly; if unknowingly, how can abstraction be true? The intellect can be variously characterized as *materialis*, *in habitu*, *adeptus*, *accomodatus* (agens), and *practicus*. Cognition requires both sensible and intelligible species or similitudes. There are species of various sorts: abstract, innate, impressed, expressed, latent in memory, and “collated.” The sensible species is first impressed upon the sense and then upon the mind; the abstract species is drawn from the imagination and impressed upon the intellect. Sensible species do not damage their respective organs, although very intense species cause pain. Intellectual cognition originates in sensation. Knowledge is *collativa* and also inquisitive, that is, in search of certitude. *Cognitio simplex* occurs through intuition (I do not find him using the term “intuitive cognition”), composite by collation. Cognition is inquisitive, having a natural desire to know everything. Man has a twofold memory: sensible and intelligible.

In the realm of psychology (in the medieval sense), Pecham's writings are extensive. The first “act” of the soul is life. The soul is the most noble of forms. There are not two souls in man, but just one composed of two substances as bases for vegetative, sensitive, and intellectual functions. Traducianism of souls from parents is excluded, rather each soul is created singly and “daily” by God. The soul is the cause of the body in the

threefold genus of causality, namely efficient, formal, and final. The soul is the “act” and mover of a most noble body; it is communicated to each and every part of the body; it is everywhere in its little world as God is everywhere in the bigger world. The soul is united to the body as a form is to matter. The human soul is incorruptible and hence immortal. Although the soul is simple, it has virtual parts, namely powers; memory, intellect, and will are powers of the soul. The sensitive soul is not corrupted with the advent of the rational soul with which it becomes one. As vegetative, the soul has three powers: nutrition, growth, and regenerative. As sensitive, the soul has motive and apprehensive powers, the latter being the five senses. To the sensitive soul are likewise attributed imaginative, estimative, and memorative powers. There is a twofold agent intellect: God and the human intellect as active. The agent and possible intellect are diverse powers of the soul. Averroes is in error for positing but one possible intellect for all humans. The human will is a self-moving power; it is at the apex of creation. The human will is free and cannot be coerced by anything else. Moral virtue is essentially rooted in the will. The appetites of the human will are rationality, concupiscence, and irascibility. The free will is not some third power composed of reason and volition. The will is free to such a point that it can withhold consent to the dictates of practical reason.

In natural philosophy, Pecham emerges as an opponent of Aquinas on a number of issues. Matter is an essence distinct from form and as such is not pure potency; by divine power, it could exist without any form. The root of corruptibility lies in matter. Matter alone is not the principle of individuation but as conjoined with form. He espoused seminal reasons whereby latent forms perdured and could be generated. Substance is known through its powers and there can be multiple powers in a single substance. Material substances have substantial parts. An accident is more dependent on substance than form is on matter. The world was present to God ideally from all eternity, but it was not “creatable” from all eternity. He is perhaps most noteworthy

for his theory of the grades of the form, in opposition to Aquinas and his followers who posited a single form for each individual. His principal treatise *De gradibus formarum* has not survived, although it was in the library of Merton College as late as the fifteenth century (Douie 1952, p. 380 note 2). His grades theory of a single form as distinct from a plurality of forms in individual beings may have been the first such refinement. The most telling argument against the single form theory was based on theological reasons, namely the need to posit a corporeal form (*corporeitatis*) regarding Christ’s body in the tomb. This led Henry of Ghent to posit a twofold form: a corporeal form generated by nature and the rational form/soul created directly by God. As Archbishop of Canterbury, he “renewed” the condemnations of Kilwardby regarding the unicity theory and this intensified the conflict between the Dominicans and Franciscans.

In the realm of moral philosophy, virtue resides essentially in the will. Political and purgative are grades of virtue. Justice is more “delightful” than its opposite. Even the unjust creature knows what justice is in the light of the eternal reasons.

Pecham’s last philosophico-theological treatise was his *Quodlibetum Romanum*, debated while he was lector at the Papal Curia c. 1277–1278. His treatise on the celestial spheres is believed to have been composed during this period.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Augustine](#)
- ▶ [Bonaventure](#)
- ▶ [Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Form and Matter](#)
- ▶ [Henry of Ghent](#)
- ▶ [Natural Philosophy](#)
- ▶ [Philosophical Psychology](#)
- ▶ [Robert Kilwardby](#)
- ▶ [Roger Marson](#)
- ▶ [Thomas Aquinas](#)

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