

PHI 542: Albertus Magnus' conception of place: *De Natura Loci* – Hendrik Lorenz

Albert's *De Natura Loci*, written in the 1250s, is an enormously important text from a number of different points of view. It is a central text of Albert's physics, thematizing the transmission of forms from the intelligible domain to the sublunary world. As such, it is a central text in Albert's philosophically creative construction of a comprehensive scientific account of the natural world that took place in the second half of the 13th century and that was to have a large influence on science and philosophy of nature for centuries to come, in part because of Albert's massive influence on his student Thomas of Aquinas. In constructing this account, Albert relies on Latin translations of Aristotle's treatises, which are being produced as he writes. He also relies, very prominently, on Latin translations of Arabic texts by philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes. From these Arabic sources enters a very noticeable Neoplatonist influence, so much so that Albert's conception of place, even though he often describes place in Aristotelian terms, is in fact much more Neoplatonist than Aristotelian; or so I will argue in the seminar.

The text is also important because it presents a view, and a theory, of the habitable world that includes many regions in the so-called Torrid Zone, the region between the two Tropics, describing them as temperate and suitable for human habitation, and speculating about their exceptional fertility (and wealth in precious stones!). Albert's geographic theory also predicts the existence of habitable lands deep inside the southern hemisphere, and even predicts the existence of such lands in the western hemisphere, in addition to the land-masses of Europe, Asia and Africa, which are the only ones recognized in the Greco-Roman tradition up to the 15th century. There is good historical reason for thinking that Albert's geographic theory with its detailed, generous and intriguing predictions about the existence of habitable and fertile lands in regions of the world unexplored by Europeans had an important influence on the discussions that resulted in Christopher Columbus' voyages in southwestern direction from the Canary Islands, beginning in 1492 (not to mention earlier and simultaneous explorations by Portuguese and Spanish voyagers in Africa).

Furthermore, the treatise on the nature of place sets out an elaborate, hierarchically ordered classification of the different climates to be found on the planet, with different causal influences on the physiologies and psychologies of inhabitants of these climates, and applicable to parts of the world known and unknown to Europeans. In working out the details of this classification, Albert relies on ancient Greek and Roman sources, such as the Hippocratic corpus, Aristotle, and Ptolemy, but Albert's classification is more specific, more comprehensive and more deeply integrated with his conception of the natural world, than are any of his ancient antecedents. As such, Albert's classification of different human groups depending on different climates is an early form of what is sometimes called climate determinism or environmental determinism; and it clearly played an important role in the ideological and social construction of human races that gets going in the context of European colonization of regions of Africa and the Americas in the 15th century.

Despite the importance of this little text from a number of different points of view, there is no adequate translation of it in any modern language. To remedy this lack, I have been engaged in a collaborative project on the text with scholars at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, since 2019, which aims to produce English and Spanish translations of the work, together with historical and philosophical commentary. The current seminar will be based on a new draft English translation of the text (to be refined in the course of the semester) and will also aim at an overall philosophical interpretation of Albert's work, focusing on three aspects: (1) Albert's theory of place and of its role in the transmission of forms from the intelligible to the material world (*De Natura Loci*, I.2-5); (2) Albert's geography (I.6-12); (3) Albert's classification of climates and groups of human beings (I.13-II.4).

Most sessions of the seminar will be closely based on particular chapters of Albert's treatise. My plan is to provide some relevant historical context and background to the treatise but for the most part to concentrate on the (non-trivial) task of making sense of the details of the text itself. Throughout the semester, translations of relevant texts, and relevant further literature, will be made available via Canvas. Knowledge of Latin will be

helpful but not necessary for taking the course. Students will be welcome to do in-seminar presentations, and, for Philosophy students, the topic qualifies for units in medieval and modern philosophy.

Syllabus (tentative)

(1) September 7: introduction; *De Natura Loci* 1

Segment 1: Theory of place

(2) 9/14: I.2

(3) 9/21: I.3

(4) 9/28: I. 4-5

Segment 2: Geography

(5) 10/5: I. 6

(6) 10/12: I. 7

10/19: FALL RECESS

(7) 10/26: I. 8-9

(8) 11/2: I. 10-12

Segment 3: Climate, physiology, psychology, race

(9) 11/9: I.13 - II.2

(10) 11/16: II.3-4

11/23: THANKSGIVING RECESS

(11) 11/30: The place of Albert's theory in the history of racism

(12) 12/7: Session will be run by an expert on Albert's philosophy of nature: TBD