

# What Is “Good Life”?

## The Influence of the Averroist

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## Intellectual Ideal on Marsilius of Padua

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*“For the sake of living well,  
... sc. having leisure  
for the liberal activities  
that result from the virtues  
both of the practical and  
of the theoretical soul.”  
(Marsilius of Padua)*

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**P**RACTICAL PHILOSOPHY is concerned with the query of a model of action that is generally accepted as optimal. This model also makes the connection between ethics and politics, because the two must converge. In ancient and medieval philosophy, the moral ideal is also applied to politics. Thus, virtues, reason, necessity, which belong to the moral field, apply to politics as well.

The disputes concerning the moral ideal shaped more than one model in the Middle Ages. The role of a dispute is to differentiate but also to communicate ideas. Therefore, we should assume that the scholars involved in such disputes were aware of the distinctions, but could also borrow arguments for their own cause. Sometimes, one cannot undoubtedly say whether one idea came directly from its source or first came to attention through an argument in a dispute and was later adopted and reconnected to its source.

On the subject of the good life, we can firstly identify the source in Aristotle’s *Politics*.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, we must take into account that the reception of Aristotelian ideas took place in the context of the medieval Christian tradition,

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which configured a different meaning for the good life. Differences cause disputes; disputes may cause new views. For us, Aristotle's writings were older than the medieval philosophy which originates in the writings of Holy Fathers, together with the important role of Augustine and other Patristic and scholastic philosophers. For the High Middle Ages however, Aristotle was a new philosophy. Therefore, the context was constituted by the Augustinian tradition<sup>2</sup> and the newly translated texts were the object of inquiry.

It seems that the thirteenth and fourteenth century philosophers which are called Averroists or Heterodox Aristotelicians<sup>3</sup> take an extreme approach by starting from Aristotle's texts and their commentaries by Averroes, thus breaking a long tradition. But, in fact, the Patristic and Augustinian tradition constitutes their background as much as for other philosophers of their time. Aristotelianism is the contrast substance that differentiates their positions.

In Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor pacis* we notice at first sight substantial references to the sources of the political Augustinian tradition.<sup>4</sup> Implicitly and also explicitly, he uses the same tradition that his opponents claim as a fundament, but he reinterprets it to serve his goal: proving that the official political conception of his period is unnatural and dangerous because it falsifies the main premises. He makes this fact clear: "I shall corroborate what I shall take myself to have demonstrated with testimonies of the truth founded upon eternity, and also with authoritative passages of the saints, its interpreters, and other approved doctors of the Christian faith, so that this book should stand by itself, needing no extrinsic proof. On the same basis I shall attack the falsehoods opposed to my conclusions and uncover the sophisms of my adversaries, which stand in the way with their involutions."<sup>5</sup>

He opposes the idea of a universal hierarchy from which every ordered structure is derived and subordinated, an idea grounded in the Neo-Platonist tradition revived in the thirteenth century disputes by the translation of the pseudo-Aristotelic treatise *Liber de causis*. From the metaphysical argument a political one was developed, as expressed in Aegidius Romanus' *De ecclesiastica potestate*. Marsilius rejects the analogy without refuting the idea of a universal hierarchy: "For it is, and was, a certain perverted opinion, which we shall unfold in what follows; assumed by way of occasion from a miraculous effect produced by the supreme cause long after the time of Aristotle, beyond the possibilities of inferior nature and the usual action of causes in things. This opinion, surely sophistic, wearing the mask of the honorable and the beneficial, is utterly inimical to the human race and will in the end, if it is not checked, bring unendurable harm to every civil order and country."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the separation of politics from the whole domain of metaphysics and theology targets only the special role of politics which, if it is natural, then

it derives directly from the Creator in a different way than the revelation. Aquinas stated that the human law is derived from the natural law, which derives from the eternal law, and from eternal law also the divine law is derived, therefore the human law (i.e. politics) is inferior to divine law (i.e. the revelation) because it is more times derived.<sup>7</sup> By demonstrating that political behavior is innate, thus part of the created nature, Marsilius intends to uphold a dualism of the divine act, from which the natural creation concerns the things in this life and the revelation pertains only to the things in afterlife.

Hence humans must be guided differently for this life and for the afterlife. The priests have the duty of guiding the Christians towards eternal salvation; they guide themselves by the Holy Scripture and the interpretations of the Holy Fathers and Christian theologians. Guiding the people in this life is a duty that belongs to the political ruler and he must find guidance in a different literature, that is, the political writings. The guidance must establish a goal and it must be the best goal. A large part of the classical philosophy was concerned with finding the best goal for man, and in the Platonic tradition this goal is identified as the supreme good. There is also a long tradition of treatises on the supreme good in the Middle Ages, comprising the work of Isidore of Seville which was sometimes named *Ethimologiarum idem de summo bono*, and in the thirteenth century the works entitled *De summo bono* by Ulrich of Strasbourg, Boethius of Dacia, Engelbert of Admont, but also works entitled *De bono*, *De natura boni*, *Summa de bono* attributed to many authors, from Varro and Augustine to Bonaventure, Albert the Great or Thomas Aquinas. The title *De summo bono* seems so important that it is also assigned to works of Boethius, Augustine and other authors.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine helps us to understand what this *supreme good* means: “reliqua est pars *moralis*, quam graeco uocabulo dicunt *ethicam*, ubi quaeritur de *summo bono*, quo referentes omnia quae agimus, et quod non propter aliud, sed propter se ipsum adpetentes id que adipiscentes nihil, quo beati simus, ulterius requiramus.”<sup>9</sup> The fact that these treatises are most important for their ethical content confirms Augustine’s affirmation that the search for the supreme good is the purpose of ethics or, generally, of practical philosophy. The finality of politics is clearly stated by Aristotle in the beginning of his book: “Every state is as we see a sort of partnership, and every partnership is formed with a view to some good (since all the actions of all mankind are done with a view to what they think to be good).”<sup>10</sup> Also, when he defines the city, he refers to its main principle, the good life: “The partnership finally composed of several villages is the city-state; it has at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency, and thus, while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the whole purpose of politics is to attain and maintain the good life and there is no greater purpose for a citizen or a ruler. This identification of a form of supreme

good (not absolute good, but utmost good) is the same subject as in the treatises discussed above, even if its determination is very different.

Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor pacis* may be regarded in a way as a continuator of the *supreme good* literary genre since his book is nothing else than a twofold demonstration of what is good for a community and how this good may be reached. And this good is beyond the political life: "Now a city, according to Aristotle in *Politics* I, chapter 1, is: 'a perfect community possessing every limit of self-sufficiency, as it is consequent to say, having thus come about for the sake of living, but existing for the sake of living well'. Now in saying, 'having come about for the sake of living, but existing for the sake of living well', Aristotle signifies its final and perfect cause, for those who live a civil life do not just live—which beasts or slaves do—but live well, sc. having leisure for the liberal activities that result from the virtues both of the practical and of the theoretical soul."<sup>12</sup>

It is not his intention to list and praise the benefits of this freedom, but yet he suggests this in the beginning of his book, commenting on Aristotle.

**T**HIS IS indeed the concept of leisure, *scholé* of Aristotle,<sup>13</sup> and the Averroist ideal of intellectual happiness.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Marsilius assumes Aristotle's ideals may lead to a certain metaphysic of human will which transcends the frame of a political writing. But the *Defensor pacis* is written in a time of crisis, during one of the major turning points in political history and in the history of political thought. Marsilius takes a very reasonable position, and even if he was able to foresee only the beginning of a change, he could not envisage its consequent effects. The hidden concept in *Defensor pacis* is the concept of *civil liberty*. Indeed, if liberty is achieved, a full range of yet undeterminable possibilities would open. Thus peace and liberty are just means for the achievement of greater goals, the practice of arts and virtues which, for Marsilius, unlike the thirteenth century Averroists, can be only fulfilled by the plurality of citizens.<sup>15</sup>

If we look closer at the occurrences of this formula of *civil liberty*, we must firstly pay attention to the language of Marsilius. He is in the situation of being a pioneer in his approach to politics, and this compels him to innovate both in demonstration and in language because "Neither Aristotle nor any other philosopher of his time or earlier could have recognized the origin and species of this cause."<sup>16</sup> Tributary to his training as a lawyer, he searches unequivocal words for political entities which did not exist or which were perverted. Thus he uses *pars principans* for not precisely indicating a king, emperor, government or bishop, and *pars valentior* for not indicating a council, guild, court, assembly or political party. The same applies to the terms concerning the civil community and citizenship. He avoids using the terms corresponding to state, kingdom or empire, city by using the abstract terms *civitas* and *civilitas*. This is intended

to reproduce the original Aristotelian technical terms of *pólis*, *politeía*, as can be seen when he introduces the first political community: “However, before we discuss the city—which is the perfect community—and its species or modes, we ought first to introduce the origin of civil communities and their regimes and ways of living.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, the derived *civilis*, translated by *civil*, means that which pertains to the community and it must not be envisaged in other senses, as the opposite of clerical, military or barbarian. Yet the concept of the natural order is opposed to the unnatural order,<sup>18</sup> to which the civil order belongs. The natural forces that lead to human actions and passions must be tempered and it is the role of law, as a result of reason, to provide the means (e.g. coercion). The one and only place where Marsilius uses precisely this expression is where he discusses military intervention: “For in time of necessity it is not only those who are assigned to military office (foot or horse) who are obliged by human law to defend civil liberty in bodily combat, but also those from other offices of the city, and all the more so those who are suitable for this purpose, especially when they are required by soldiers or their leader.”<sup>19</sup>

We cannot overlook the importance of the principle mentioned here. If the human law obliges general participation in battle, the purpose of battle must have a capital importance. This because, if civil liberty is destroyed, the civil community or state will cease to exist. Here the doctrine of the just war of Marsilius can be found, even if it is not explicitly exposed.<sup>20</sup> In a note to this passage found in C. W. Previt -Orton’s first modern edition of *Defensor pacis*, a connection is made to the situation of the Italian communes.<sup>21</sup> But if it would only relate to a specific event, it wouldn’t have any significance for political theory. Nevertheless this is commonplace for any revolutionary doctrine that demands bodily confrontation on the ground of a superior cause. If this cause is civil liberty, it would sound very modern, but we cannot neglect the context of the work, in which liberty is less than what we know today.

The place where civil liberty is most obviously seen as a principle equivalent to peace is at the end, in the chapter which explains the title of the book: “Furthermore, both prince and subject, the primary elements of any civil order, can understand by this treatise what they must do in order to preserve the peace and their own liberty.”<sup>22</sup> Here we can see that *peace* and *liberty* are seen as expressions of the same goal and conditions for the existence of a civil regime. It is clear from the context that “conservatione pacis et propriae libertatis” has a distributive sense. Thus, remembering this connection, we can better understand both terms and look back throughout the book, reading one instead of the other. Also we could call the book *Defensor libertatis civilis*, but this probably would not have the impact of the clear sounding *Defensor pacis*.

The significance of this association is that we can explain the different meanings of the term *peace*. Marsilius of Padua does not put forward the absolute peace

of humankind. There must be some struggle inside his proposed civil community, mainly because there can be a debate for the common decisions (this thing will be emphasized about a century later by Niccolò Machiavelli) and because civil tranquility is continuously enforced by law through coercion. Hence *peace* is the *liberty* to implement the natural order in a community. There are some other contexts where Marsilius speaks about liberty. We can identify a group of occurrences in connection with the justified battle, having the same intention as the first quote mentioned here; he mentions liberty as the goal for which the city must be defended: “. . . a pugna . . . hominibus in civitate libertas provenit et servatur . . . , . . . omnis communis utilitas turbaretur . . . , ut volencium intrinsecus aut extrinsecus opprimere libertatem communem, propriam vero libertatem defendencium,” etc.<sup>23</sup> We understand that the subject of this liberty is not the individual, but the politically organized community, and this point may support Previt -Orton and Nicolai Rubinstein’s view on the connection with the Italian city states.

The other few contexts speak about human liberty as will. The subject here is the person and the dominion or lordship: “dicitur nomen domini de humana voluntate seu libertate secundum se, sumatur dominium ultimo modo, pro voluntate scilicet seu libertate humana,” and, quoting from Augustine, “communem omnibus in Christo libertatem esse, quod de spirituali libertate utique verum est, non de carnali.”<sup>24</sup> There are several good articles on the concept of dominium in Marsilius of Padua.<sup>25</sup> Their point is that in *Defensor pacis* there are two assumptions of the *dominium*, a public one and a private one. The public *dominium* designates the regimen, while the private one refers to the household. On the one hand, Marsilius connects them to emphasize the leadership through the household (like Aristotle does in *Politics*, Book I). On the other hand, he differentiates them to support the idea that only public acts are subject to law and private matters, like the religious beliefs,<sup>26</sup> must enjoy freedom.

One major occurrence of the term is in the definition quoted from Aristotle: “The first proposition of this subsyllogism is almost apparent of itself: for because ‘the city is a community of free men’, as we read in *Politics* III chapter 4, any and every citizen should be free and not suffer the despotism (i.e. the servile dominion) of another.”<sup>27</sup>

This puts the *dominium* in the same sense as an object of will but further differentiates between despotic will and commonly accepted will. The idea of a people that makes its own laws is the basis of Marsilius’ philosophy and it presupposes the people’s consent. This is particularly important because it connects liberty with law, as we have seen above. Furthermore, liberty is predicated about the whole and about every part of the community: “quilibet civis liber esse debet.” Marsilius limits his affirmations to the negative aspect, i.e. the lack of freedom. His goal is not to build an idealistic image about a blessed



people, but to find the arguments by which a people can rule itself through its own will.

The status of liberty in Marsilius may now be more evident: it is the chief condition of existence of the self-governed city and an expression of its goal. Liberty may be achieved through a violent act of repealing intruders and may be guarded in the same manner. We may note that Marsilius uses *liberty* when he writes about conflicts, probably because it would be contradictory to use the word *peace*. He tries to reject his contemporary doctrine of a just war that requires an intervention for a mere trespass against faith. There is no superior reason for which the prince should engage in war other than for protecting the existence of his city state.

The new conception of civil laws implicitly establishes the freedom of thought and the freedom of action. If liberty applies also to individuals and to the *civitas*, it must be said that it is distributively applied. There is no abstract concept of liberty, neither absolute liberty. We should not assert that Marsilius had risen to the level of awareness to promote liberalism or even libertarianism. Citizens are free to establish laws, but are then consequently bound by these laws. Only as a part of the community can one human being exercise his full freedom. Therefore liberty means at the same time freedom, free will, full responsibility and self awareness: freedom of self governing, free will in establishing the laws, full responsibility of each individual as a member of the community and self awareness of the necessity of political order. Before all is man's liberty to accomplish his greatest goals on earth, that is, to practice liberal arts and virtues, both theoretical and practical.

The concept of *good life* or *supreme good* attained by practical and theoretical liberal activities had a substantial importance for the thirteenth century Averroists. The best known reference is Boethius of Dacia's treatise *De summo bono sive de vita philosophi*. Boethius of Dacia also maintains the idea that this kind of supreme good pertains to the man in this finite life: "Since in every kind of being there is a supreme possible good, and since man too is a certain species or kind of being, there must be a supreme possible good for man, not a good which is supreme in the absolute sense, but one that is supreme for man. The goods which are accessible to man are limited and do not extend to infinity. By means of reason we will seek to determine what the supreme good is which is accessible to man."<sup>28</sup>

This difference (and, supposedly, dualism) is maintained also by Marsilius:

*There are two modes, however, of this same living and living well that is appropriate for man: one temporal or worldly, but also another, which is customarily called eternal or heavenly. And it being that philosophers as a whole could not convincingly demonstrate the second mode, sc. the sempiternal, nor was it among*

*things that are self-evident, therefore they did not trouble themselves to pass on whatever might be in order to it. But on the subject of living and living well or the good life in its first mode, sc. the worldly, and those things that are necessary for it, the glorious philosophers grasped almost the entire matter by demonstration.*<sup>29</sup>

One should remark that this is a tough statement: it ignores all arguments of the thirteenth century, condemnations and refutations of the Aristotelian Averroists, from which he was not far away. This ignorance is also confirmed by the list of authorities which he quotes, and in which we cannot find almost any contemporary thinker who speaks on these issues. However, he cannot use their ideas aimed at the singularity of the philosopher in his state of excellence, otherwise he would be forced to admit that every citizen should be a philosopher. In fact, he does not speak of a need, but a possibility for every man to achieve his goal.

Aquinas had already rejected the supremacy of philosophy,<sup>30</sup> and the thesis was condemned explicitly in the Condemnation of 1277. The conflict is self-evident. Marsilius nevertheless adds something more to this idea of supremacy: “And since these arts could not be practised except by a large number of men, nor retained except by their mutual communication, men needed to gather together to secure the advantage to be had from them and to avoid disadvantage.”<sup>31</sup>

We see here the connection of his political project with an early form of rationalism or humanism. These are the fruits of tranquility and peace about which Marsilius speaks in the beginning of his book. Many critics consider that the *Defensor pacis* is just an anticlerical reaction in the context of the crisis concerning the Italian republics.<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the rational aspect may seem to be only an argument to claim political change. But Marsilius must have read certain treatises on the supreme good during his studies or during the period when he taught (even if we have no proof that he had read Boethius of Dacia directly). This was a main theme for the thinkers exploring practical questions. Nevertheless, each treatise defends a particular principle behind this supreme good, and the same thing is done in the *Defensor pacis*, where the utmost good is not a fixed action or state, but the possibility for everyone to perform any good action.

**T**HEREFORE, WE see that Marsilius is more deeply rooted in the medieval tradition than it was claimed and that the structure of his discourse is tributary to the ethical genre developed in the Middle Ages, a structure that he fills with Aristotelian arguments. There are even proofs that he forces the texts of Aristotle to fit his arguments by altering their meaning.<sup>33</sup> He does not go far from Aristotle’s idea, but he reaches it in a different manner, one



that is inspired by many other medieval thinkers and which he supposes to be self-evident. This idea of a self-evident truth is nevertheless contextual: is the truth that must surpass all the known disputes. For that purpose, he addresses the arguments that are expressed at a certain time, by certain people, and other potential arguments that may come from similar sources. Consequently, he does not intend to recover Aristotle's thinking for its sake, but to write something useful for the proximal readers. In any crisis, one needs a guide to overcome it, and the *Defensor pacis* intends to be this guide for a long age of transition from theocracy towards civil politics. □

## Notes

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2, 1252 b 27–30.
2. We shall keep in mind that “Augustinianism” designates the tradition which is rooted in Augustine's writings but differs to some extent from Augustine's intentions, as in “Political Augustinianism”; cf. Henri-Xavier Arquillière, *L'Augustinisme politique: Essai sur la formation des théories politiques au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1934).
3. F. van Steenberghen, *La philosophie au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Louvain: Publications universitaires; Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1966), 372.
4. There are over 50 direct references, quotes or paraphrases to Augustine alone. He also refers many times to Ambrose, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Chrysostom, Isidore of Seville, Saint Jerome.
5. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, trans. Annabel Brett (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9.
6. *Ibid.*, 6.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 95, a. 4 and *Scripta super libros Sententiarum*, II, d. 44, q. 2, a. 3.
8. Boethius, in Guillelmus Wheatley, *In Boethii De consolatione Philosophiae*, prologue, 2, 1, 4; Augustine, in *Decretum Gratiani*, pars IIa, causa 11, q. 3.
9. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, lib. 8, cap. 8.
10. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1, 1252 a 1–4, trans. H. Rackham (London–Cambridge: The Loeb Classical Library, 1959), 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 9.
12. Marsilius of Padua, 18.
13. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 15, 1334a23–33.
14. Boethius of Dacia, *On the Supreme Good*, trans. J. F. Wippel, in *Medieval Sources in Translation*, vol. 30 (Toronto: PIMS, 1987).
15. Marsilius of Padua: “And since these arts could not be practised except by a large number of men, nor retained except by their mutual communication, men needed to gather together to secure the advantage to be had from them and to avoid disadvantage.” (*Defensor pacis*, 20)

16. Ibid., 6.
17. Ibid., 14 (“Ante tamen quam de civitate illiusque speciebus aut modis agamus, que perfecta communitas est, debemus inducere primo civiliū communitatū originem suorumque regiminū et modorum vivendi”).
18. Ibid., I, 5, 4.
19. Ibid., 400 (“Quemadmodum enim ad civilem libertatem defendendam per pugnam corporalem tempore necessitatis humana lege non solum obligantur, qui assignati sunt officio militari, pedestri aut equestri, verum eciam qui ex aliis officiis civitatis extiterint, et amplius qui ad hoc sunt magia idonei, precipue curo per militares aut ipsorum ducem fuerint requisiti . . .”).
20. Cf. Mihai Maga, “Problema războiului just,” in *Filosofia politică a lui Marsilio din Padova* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2012), 140–146.
21. *The Defensor pacis of Marsilius of Padua*, ed. C.W. Previt -Orton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 351, n. 2.
22. Marsilius of Padua, 557 (“Amplius per ipsum comprehendere potest tam principans quam subiectum que sunt elementa prima civilitatis cuiuslibet, quid observare oporteat propter conservacionem pacis et proprie libertatis”).
23. Marsilius of Padua, II, XXII, 12 and I, VI, 10; I, XVII, 4; II, XXIV, 17; II, XXVI, 7.
24. Marsilius of Padua, II, XII, 16; II, XIII, 9, II, V, 8.
25. Cary J. Nederman, “Private Will, Public Justice: Household, Community and Consent in Marsiglio of Padua’s *Defensor Pacis*,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, 4 (1990): 699–717; Janet Coleman, “Medieval Discussion of Property: Ratio and Dominium According to John of Paris and Marsilius of Padua,” *History of Political Thought* 4, 2 (1983): 209–228; etc.
26. Marsilius of Padua, III, II, 3.
27. Marsilius of Padua, 70 (“Prima propositio huius prosyllogismi apparet quasi per se; nam quia *civitas est communitas liberorum*, ut scribitur 3<sup>o</sup> Politice, capitulo 4<sup>o</sup>, quilibet civis liber esse debet nec alterius ferre *despociam*, id est servile e dominium”); cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279 a 21.
28. Boethius of Dacia, *On the Supreme Good*, 27.
29. Marsilius of Padua, 19.
30. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 6.
31. Marsilius of Padua, I, 4, 3.
32. Cf. George Garnett, *Marsilius of Padua and ‘the Truth of History’* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–48.
33. Cf. Cary J. Nederman, “On Marsilius’ Misinterpretations of Some Texts of Aristotle,” in Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor Pacis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 433–434.

### **Abstract**

#### What Is “Good Life”? The Influence of the Averroist Intellectual Ideal on Marsilius of Padua

In this paper we discuss the implication of a moral ideal in the conception of a civil political model in Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor pacis*. The tradition of treatises on the supreme good finds a continuation in Marsilius of Padua's work that identifies the supreme good in politics with peace and liberty. In this sense, we notice that Marsilius is closer to the medieval tradition, and Aristotle is used merely as a source of arguments. Thus, the politician must be a guide for the people to reach the utmost good in this life, but this good is not politically determined. The good life is identified, just like by other Aristotelians, as the leisure of practicing liberal activities, both theoretical and practical.

### **Keywords**

medieval political thought, history of political philosophy, Averroism, supreme good, Marsilius of Padua