

RML 41784

Routledge History of Philosophy  
Volume III



MIL 357602

Medieval Philosophy



EDITED BY  
*John Marenbon*



DIPARTIMENTO di FILOSOFIA

INVENTARIO n. 27977



London and New York

# Introduction

*John Marenbon*



Medieval philosophy, the subject of this volume, is a distinct tradition within the history of Western philosophy. Its four sub-traditions are 'Arab' philosophy – which took place in Islamic lands and was written usually in Arabic, though sometimes in Persian; 'Jewish' philosophy – the work of Jews in Islamic and Christian countries, written in Arabic or Hebrew; 'Latin' philosophy – produced in the countries of Christian Europe where Latin was the main language of higher learning and usually, though not always, written in Latin; and (of rather less importance) 'Byzantine' philosophy – written in Greek in the Christian empire of Byzantium. Medieval Arab philosophy begins with the first philosophical writings in Arabic in the ninth century; it ends, as a tradition of importance, with the death of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in 1198, after which growing religious intolerance scarcely permitted the practice of philosophy as it had been known. Medieval Jewish philosophy begins in Islam not long after the Arab tradition, with which it is closely connected. It went on to flourish also in the Jewish colonies of Christian Europe and declined in the fifteenth century. Philosophy in the medieval Latin West begins in the late eighth century, at the court of Charlemagne. The tradition has no clear chronological end point and its final centuries coincide in time with the different, though related, tradition usually described as 'Renaissance philosophy'. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century universities continued to produce philosophical work firmly in the medieval tradition (often, indeed, consciously restating the ideas of one or another great master of the thirteenth or fourteenth century), and in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spain there was a flowering of philosophy which, though with differences of emphasis, is distinctively medieval in its sources, techniques and concerns. In Byzantium, it is hard to place any but an arbitrary boundary between late ancient Neoplatonism

and medieval Greek philosophy. The tradition was brought to a clear end, however, when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453.

Why, though, speak of a single, distinct tradition of 'medieval philosophy' when four different traditions, developed in different languages and cultures, appear to be involved? And why include works written in Persia and the Middle East, in non-European languages, in the history of *Western* philosophy? These seem difficult questions, but the answer is simple (although it is wrong to use the description 'Western philosophy' in a cavalier way: the importance of works in Arabic for medieval philosophy should make historians ask how Western 'Western philosophy' is<sup>1</sup>). The four traditions are interlinked so closely that, whilst their differences are important, they are best understood as a whole. First, all use a common heritage of ancient Greek philosophy, especially that practised in the Neoplatonic schools of late antiquity, although with a greater emphasis on the complete works, rather than just the logic, of Aristotle. Second, in their development, the traditions are interconnected. Medieval Jewish philosophers were deeply influenced by the Arab thinkers they read, and translations of Arabic writing transformed the study of philosophy in the Latin West from the late twelfth century onwards. The Byzantine tradition was less open, although there were some translations from Latin into Greek late in the Middle Ages. Third, all four traditions belong to cultures dominated by a monotheistic, revealed religion: Islam, Judaism or Christianity. Although the relations between religious doctrine and philosophical speculation varied both from one tradition to another, and at different periods within each tradition, the questions posed and constraints exercised by revelation were similar in all three religions and exercised a profound influence on the philosophical work produced within their ambit.

It is this third feature – its close connection with revealed religion – which, more than anything else, explains a final, extrinsic characteristic which applies to the medieval tradition of philosophy as a whole: its comparative neglect. The *Routledge History of Philosophy* itself provides an illustration. This volume, devoted to the Middle Ages, must consider roughly twice the length of time covered by the following seven volumes, dealing with Renaissance and modern philosophy. But the allocation of space to medieval philosophy by the general editors is, none the less, unusually generous by the standards usually accepted today. The more common estimation of the Middle Ages among professional philosophers is indicated by a recent, and in most other respects excellent, textbook designed to introduce students both to philosophy as it is practised today, and to the history of philosophy. The editor explains to his readers that:

For a very long period – roughly from the fourth to the seventeenth centuries AD – thought in the West was dominated by Christianity. This does not mean that there was no philosophy; far from it; but much of it served theology or at least (except in such cases as logic) it was constrained by theological considerations.<sup>2</sup>

Medieval (and Renaissance) philosophy is, apparently in consequence, eliminated from the book entirely, except for a fleeting reference to Aquinas. The historical section jumps from the Greeks to Descartes without further comment.

The historiography of medieval philosophy (especially medieval Latin philosophy, which has dominated historians' attention) can be seen as a series of reactions and counter-reactions to the dismissive approach to the area illustrated here in a modern and extreme form, but widespread in many variations, at least since the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The earliest serious historians of medieval philosophy, in the nineteenth century (such as Victor Cousin and Barthélemy Hauréau) were willing to concede the principle on which the dismissive approach, adopted by those who would ignore medieval philosophy altogether, was founded. The dominance of Christianity and its influence on the thought of philosophers was, they granted, a grave defect in medieval philosophy; but not so grave that the period was without interest. Cousin, for instance, argued that in the Middle Ages ecclesiastical authority was absolute and medieval philosophy – 'scholasticism' as he called it – was used 'in the service of faith, under the aegis of religious authority: it moved within a circle that was not of its own devising, but had been imposed on it by an authority other than its own' ([Intr. 1] 28). Yet philosophy still retained something of its own nature, and Cousin believed that even medieval scholasticism took the four forms he found in each epoch of philosophy: idealism, sensualism, scepticism and mysticism. The approach produced richer results than its apologetic tone would seem to promise, aided perhaps by Cousin's belief in a clear, though non-linear, development of philosophy from antiquity to his own day.

From the late nineteenth century until nearly the present, however, most work on medieval philosophy has been carried out from a very different point of view.<sup>4</sup> Historians strongly committed to orthodox Catholicism, many of them in holy orders, were quick to build on a long tradition of medieval scholarship within the Church (especially among religious) and take up the new interest in medieval philosophy. Understandably, however, they were opposed to the approach followed by Cousin and other 'rationalist' historians (as they described them). Yet they did not, as might have been expected, counter

it by arguing that the influence of revealed religion on medieval philosophy was not cramping, but beneficial. Rather, they insisted that the great medieval thinkers (pre-eminently, Thomas Aquinas) recognized a distinction between philosophy and theology. They were, indeed, great theologians; but they were also great philosophers, who elaborated rational systems of philosophy independent of revelation. It is, they argued, the job of the historian of medieval philosophy to isolate and explain these philosophical systems. Part of the stimulus behind this approach may well have been provided by the problem which many Catholic thinkers and churchmen in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century believed modern philosophical movements posed for them. They saw most contemporary philosophy as hostile to the claims of religion and hoped to find in medieval thinkers a system which could be set against the current schools of thought. For this purpose, it was essential that, although scholastic philosophy should be fully compatible with Christian doctrine and lead naturally towards it, it should also be recognized as a fully independent philosophy, separable from revealed doctrine and able to compete on equal terms with other schools of thought. The advantage of this approach is that it brought an interest to medieval thinkers which was neither condescending nor merely antiquarian. Its disadvantage is that the distinction between philosophy and theology in the Middle Ages (even just in the Latin tradition) was neither clear-cut nor undisputed nor unchanging, and that the modern scholastic philosophy elaborated on the basis of medieval models is intellectually feeble.<sup>5</sup>

In recent decades, three trends have been particularly important in shaping approaches to medieval philosophy. All areas of medieval study have become more and more professional, and there has been an increasing emphasis on the need for research on the raw material of medieval scholarship: the large, still in many parts unexplored collections of manuscripts in libraries throughout Europe. So much remained, and remains, to be done in the way of editing works of medieval philosophy, studying their diffusion, establishing chronologies and tracing influences that many scholars have devoted their careers to this type of work. What they achieve, so long as they are technically competent, is of enormous value; indeed, a good edition is likely to go on being used and appreciated long after the best of interpretative studies have been left to gather dust. There is, however, a tendency among some scholars to see these sort of tasks as constituting the main business of historians of medieval philosophy. Once the manuscripts have been studied and edited most of the historian's work, they feel, has been done: it remains only to present the medieval philosopher's thoughts in terms as close as possible to his own; any attempt at deeper analysis or, God forbid, criticism is disparaged as 'unhistorical'. In this

way, the pursuit of scholarly goals, so valuable in itself, is made to obstruct the *understanding* of medieval philosophy.

This emphasis on technical historical and editorial scholarship occurs mostly among scholars who regard themselves primarily as medievalists (and often belong to history or to literary faculties in universities). A very different trend is to be found among the scholars of medieval philosophy in the philosophy faculties of universities in Britain, North America and Australasia. Whereas medieval philosophy has usually had a place in philosophy courses in continental Europe, up until the 1950s it was almost entirely ignored by English-speaking analytical philosophers, working in the tradition of Frege and Russell. Then a number of pioneers – medievalists who had taught themselves logic, such as Ernest Moody; logicians with medieval interests, such as Peter Geach and Arthur Prior – began to point out the remarkable parallels between modern and medieval logic.<sup>6</sup> Many of the medieval logicians' ideas could be clarified by using modern symbolic logic to describe them, and it became apparent that in some fields they had anticipated the discoveries of the twentieth century. More broadly, the highly technical, unrhetorical, logically-based manner of addressing philosophical issues in the medieval universities – which had often been another cause of neglect – was seen to be uncannily close to the methods of the twentieth-century analytical school. Since the 1960s or 1970s a group of philosophers, mainly in North America, led by Norman Kretzmann, have brought the interests, technical training and clarity of the analytical method to bear on a range of mostly thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophy and, especially, logic. *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Kretzmann, Jan Pinborg and Anthony Kenny (whose career has combined original work in modern philosophy with studies of ancient and medieval philosophers), is both a manifesto of this approach, and a monument to its achievements in the years up until 1982.<sup>7</sup> It remains the single most important modern book on medieval philosophy.

The 'analytic' approach to medieval philosophy championed by these scholars searches for passages of philosophical interest in medieval works, extracting them where necessary from their wider theological or other context. The aim is to set out as clearly as possible the arguments used by medieval philosophers, especially where they relate to concerns shared by modern philosophers, and to examine them critically, in much the same way as a philosopher now would examine the arguments of one of his contemporaries. The great success of this method is that it enables the medieval philosophers to be understood. Understanding a philosophical argument or position involves being able to explain the claims it makes and the distinctions it involves, and being able to see what would count as an argument against it.

Most non-analytical discussions of medieval philosophy fail to do this, both from lack of close attention to the stages of each argument and from the decision not to attempt translation of medieval terms into modern ones, which we now can meaningfully manipulate in our reasoning. In this sense, the analytical method sets a standard which any conscientious student of medieval philosophy should emulate: to retreat from its demands is to seek refuge in antiquarian obscurantism.

None the less, there is reason to doubt that the analytical method, without further development and change, provides the path which will lead medieval philosophy, as the editors of the *Cambridge History* hoped ([Intr. 8] 3), from the 'philosophical ghetto' and make its study 'intellectually continuous' with the activity of contemporary philosophy. Despite the impression to the contrary that the last two paragraphs might have engendered, the study of medieval philosophy is *not* flourishing in English-speaking philosophy departments. Its exponents there are few and thinly spread. For most students of philosophy, and professional philosophers, medieval philosophy is a non-subject, while medieval historians continue to approach philosophical texts in ignorance of the analytical method or hostility to it. The failure of the analytical approach to medieval philosophy to win many converts may be blamed partly on academic narrow-mindedness, but partly it must be traced to the nature of its results. Although the analytical approach has made a number of medieval arguments and positions comprehensible, it has done little to show why it is worth studying and understanding them. At best, the medieval authors are demonstrated to have anticipated modern discoveries. More often, their arguments, although ingenious, are exposed as flawed. The analysts are, indeed, eager to emphasize, despite these results, the greatness of the best medieval philosophers as philosophers, but philosophy students, even if convinced by these protestations, might be excused for preferring to study other great philosophers of the past, whose overall positions link up more obviously with modern concerns, whilst historians will be left puzzled about what exactly all this detailed scrutinizing of argument and counter-argument is supposed to have revealed. At the root of the problem is the way in which the analytical approach strips away the context of medieval discussions and pays scant regard to the overall aims and presuppositions of the writers, in order to isolate a core of philosophical argument. Yet, it might be thought, its exponents have no alternative. Whereas the wider contexts of early modern and, strangely, ancient philosophical arguments have strong connections with modern concerns, the contexts of the medieval arguments – very often theological – seem irremediably strange and foreign to present-day concerns. This judgement, however, is too swift. The wider contexts of medieval philosophical arguments need to be grasped

thoroughly and in their relation to general problems and tensions in medieval culture, rather than seen superficially and in isolation. Then their interest, and their connections with modern concerns, will emerge.

A third trend, evident in the work of some of the leading scholars of medieval philosophy in Europe (such as Kurt Flasch, Alain de Libera, Ruedi Imbach and Burkhard Mojsisch),<sup>8</sup> shows just such a willingness to explore and explain the wider contexts of medieval philosophy. Each of these scholars has concentrated especially on areas which have traditionally been thought marginal to medieval philosophy: the Platonic tradition which flourished in late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Germany, philosophical works written for or by laymen, philosophical writing in the vernacular by figures such as Dante and Eckhart. Their claim is not merely that this material deserves attention, but also that it helps to provide a new picture of the underlying concerns and aims, and of the range, of medieval philosophy.

This volume does not seek to represent any one method of treating medieval philosophy. Its contributors were chosen because of their specialist knowledge of the individual areas they discuss, and also with the aim of producing a book which would *not* follow a single approach to the area, but show something of the diversity of approaches now current. The various approaches have, however, been carefully matched to the subject-matter, so as to provide different points of entry to the subject for readers from different academic backgrounds. To take just the most striking examples. Later medieval logic and the work of Ockham are the two areas of medieval philosophy with the most obvious links with modern analytical philosophy. The chapters devoted to them (17 and 14) have been written by scholars able to bring out and explain these links; readers from an analytical background might wish to begin here. In his chapter on Eriugena and Anselm (6), Stephen Gersh has drawn on a different strand of modern philosophy, the semiotic theories originating in France. These theories are not to everyone's taste (Gersh himself makes clear how distant his own approach is from the editor's!), but Eriugena's work, especially, raises questions about reading, interpretation and polysemy, which are now of wide interest and have rarely been recognized in medieval philosophy. Latin philosophy of the early Middle Ages is often anonymous and needs to be studied not just by looking at individual texts and authors, but also by a careful examination of the manuscript evidence of teaching and learning. Rosamund McKitterick brings a manuscript specialist's attention to this area. Readers with a historical background may find her chapter (5) a good starting place or, if they are interested in broader questions about the relation between religion



and the transmission of culture, they might look to the chapter on Boethius (1), or that by Jean Jolivet on earlier Arab philosophy (2) or by Zénon Kaluza on late medieval philosophy (18). The general reader, unsure perhaps whether or not medieval philosophy has anything at all to offer, could not do better than begin with the chapter (11) on the most celebrated medieval thinker of all, Aquinas, where Brian Davies brings out, in simple, non-technical terms, some of the themes in his work which are still important today.

The chapters of this volume may, then, be taken individually, as essays in different styles on various, related (and chronologically ordered) subjects. But there is also a way in which this volume should be seen and used as a whole. Both those coming new to medieval philosophy, and those already familiar with the area, need a chronological and geographical/linguistic map of the subject. This volume offers a map of the subject as it is seen now by specialists – and it is a map strikingly different in two ways from that offered by existing general histories of medieval philosophy in English.<sup>9</sup> First, most histories treat Arab and Jewish philosophy almost exclusively with regard to their influence on Latin philosophy, almost as if Avicenna, Averroes and Maimonides had written so that one day they could be studied by Aquinas and Duns Scotus. By contrast, the chapters on Arab and Jewish philosophy here are the work of experts in Arab and Jewish thought and culture and emphasize both the cultural context of these philosophers and their achievement in absolute terms.<sup>10</sup> Second, in most histories of medieval philosophy, the thirteenth century is seen as the period of greatest achievement in Latin philosophy, epitomized by the work of Thomas Aquinas, with the centuries before leading up to it by way of preparation and the centuries after representing a decline, slow at first, then steep. In this *History*, by contrast, the early medieval period and twelfth century is seen as an important area of philosophy in its own right, and the later medieval centuries are not overshadowed by the thirteenth. Although Aquinas is recognized as an outstandingly great thinker, his work is seen as belonging to the first generation of Latin philosophers who had thoroughly absorbed the new translations of Aristotle and the Arab and Jewish writers: the tradition of medieval philosophy became more sophisticated in the century following his death and it remained lively (despite the vicissitudes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) until the early 1600s.


 NOTES
 

- 1 This point is brought out very clearly in de Libera [Intr. 9].
- 2 A. C. Grayling (ed.) *Philosophy: a Guide through the Subject*, Oxford, 1995, p. 3.

- 3 Hostility to medieval philosophy (and especially to medieval logic) goes, of course, far further back: to the fourteenth century, when early humanists began to attack what they perceived as the obscurity and 'barbarous Latin of the university logicians. But these critics did not complain about the connections between philosophical concerns and revealed doctrine. On the historiography of medieval philosophy, see also Marenbon [Intr. 10; 83–90] and Van Steenberghen [Intr. 13] and, especially, Imbach and Maierù [Intr. 6].
- 4 The most distinguished recent exponent of the approach described in this paragraph is Fernand Van Steenberghen (see, for example, [Intr. 12]). His approach has influenced English-language readers both through translations of his work (for instance [Intr. 13]) and through David Knowles's widely read textbook [Intr. 8] which is heavily indebted to Van Steenberghen.
- 5 There is not space here properly to consider Etienne Gilson, whose work still provides many with their first and only glimpse of medieval philosophy. Gilson was both a remarkable scholar and a brilliant, independent (and often idiosyncratic) thinker, influenced by modern philosophers, especially Heidegger. In the course of his life, he moved further and further away from the model of medieval philosophy as a discipline separable from Christian doctrine, as he developed his notion of 'Christian philosophy', impossible without revelation, yet distinct from theology. See A. de Libera, 'Les Etudes de philosophie médiévale en France d'Etienne Gilson à nos jours', in Imbach and Maierù [Intr. 6] at 22–33.
- 6 Especially important pioneering books are Geach [Intr. 3] and Moody [Intr. 11].
- 7 There have, of course, been many important studies of medieval philosophy using the analytical method in the fifteen years since then. Two of the most impressive are Marilyn McCord Adams's two-volume study of Ockham [14.12] (discussed in Chapter 14) and Simo Knuutila's work on modality [1.21]. (For complicated historical reasons, philosophy in Finland has tended to belong to the English-language analytical school, though without the indifference towards the history of philosophy, found in many English and American philosophy departments.)
- 8 See Flasch [Intr. 2] and Imbach [Intr. 5]. For the work of de Libera and Mojsisch, see especially Chapter 10. This chapter is intended merely as a digest of some of the important ideas proposed by these scholars, and to provide basic information on Bonaventure and the translations which would not otherwise have been included in the volume. Its author is not a specialist in the area!
- 9 It is close, however, to that provided by Alain de Libera in [Intr. 9], which is strongly recommended to all who can read French.
- 10 The space allocated to Arab and Jewish philosophy here is, however, less than it deserves. And Byzantine philosophy, although less important, ought not, practical considerations aside, to have been excluded (for a good survey, see de Libera [Intr. 9] 9–51). My excuse as editor is that, given severe pressures on the space available, it seemed sensible to angle the volume towards the material which would be most readily accessible, in translation and in the original, to readers.


 BIBLIOGRAPHY
 

- Intr. 1 Cousin, V. *Cours de Philosophie par M. V. Cousin: introduction à l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris, 1828.
- Intr. 2 Flasch, K. *Das philosophische Denken im Mittelalter: Von Augustin zu Macchiavelli*, Stuttgart, 1986.
- Intr. 3 Geach, P. T. *Reference and Generality: an Examination of Some Medieval and Modern Theories*, Ithaca, NY and London, 1962; amended edn, 1980.
- Intr. 4 Gilson, E. *A History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, London, 1955.
- Intr. 5 Imbach, R. *Laien in der Philosophie des Mittelalters: Hinweise und Anregungen zu einem vernachlässigten Thema* (Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie 14), Amsterdam, 1989.
- Intr. 6 Imbach, R. and Maierù, A. *Gli studi di filosofia medievale fra otto e novecento* (Storia e letteratura, studi e testi 179), Rome, 1989.
- Intr. 7 Kenny, A., Kretzmann, N. and Pinborg, J. *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy, from the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600*, Cambridge, 1982 (hereafter abbreviated to CHLMP).
- Intr. 8 Knowles, D. *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, 2nd edn, ed. D. E. Luscombe and C. N. L. Brooke, London and New York, 1988.
- Intr. 9 Libera, A. de *La Philosophie Médiévale*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1995.
- Intr. 10 Marenbon, J. *Later Medieval Philosophy (1150–1350): an Introduction*, rev. edn, London and New York, 1991.
- Intr. 11 Moody, E. A. *Truth and Consequence in Mediaeval Logic*, Amsterdam, 1953; repr. Westwood, Conn., 1976).
- Intr. 12 Van Steenberghen, F. *La Philosophie au XIIIe Siècle*, Louvain, 1966.
- Intr. 13 ——— *Aristotle in the West*, 2nd edn, trans. L. Johnston, Louvain, 1970.
- Intr. 14 ——— *Introduction à l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale*, Louvain, 1974.