A. S. MCGRADE

Introduction

The study of medieval philosophy is flourishing, as witness the selective bibliography for this book. And yet, from some philosophical viewpoints – analytic, continental, or science-oriented – the subject of this volume can still seem remote. Where ontology recapitulates philology, or *Dasein* replaces being and essence, or naturalism needs no arguing, the immersion of medieval thinkers in questions about eternity, God, and the immateriality of intellect can seem incomprehensible, if occasionally intriguing. This Companion seeks to enhance fascination while diminishing incomprehension. The contributors hope to bring readers into medieval discussions as directly as possible, enabling them to appreciate for themselves the philosophical motives instigating these discussions and the boldness, subtlety, and analytic rigor with which they were carried on. The aim is to exhibit the variety and freshness of medieval approaches to problems rather than to evaluate solutions. This is not to deny that timeless truth can be found in the material presented. Many students of medieval metaphysics would hold that the discipline had entered on "the sure path of a science," in Kant's phrase, several centuries before Kant restricted its scope to laying bare the conditions of possible experience (and would attribute Kant's dismissal of earlier efforts as "random groping" to typical Enlightenment ignorance of medieval thought). We are convinced, however, that the insights of medieval philosophy appear most clearly in the midst of the discussions in which the medievals themselves sought them. Medieval treatments of philosophical problems are not as a rule easy to get *through*. If that were so, there would be no need for this volume. We hope to demonstrate that the medieval discussions are well worth getting *into*.

1

2   A. S. MCGRADE

ENTRY POINTS

The strangeness of medieval philosophy should not be exaggerated.
A great deal of what is presented here can readily be engaged with
by readers in a philosophically current frame of mind. This is due
in good measure to the fact that recent philosophy has caught up
with some characteristic medieval interests. Here are some exam-
ples. The high esteem now enjoyed by medieval logic rests partly on
the brilliance of scholastic semantics in treating paradoxes of self-
reference and the problems posed by intentional contexts, "modern"
topics touched on in Jennifer Ashworth's chapter on medieval lan-
guage and logic. Increased sophistication in the disciplines of history
and philosophy of science lets us appreciate the sophistication to be
found in medieval natural philosophy. Even the physics of angels,
as Edith Sylla shows, has points of interest for the philosophically
scientific mind. Thanks largely to the work of David Armstrong,
the medieval problem of universals no longer seems "merely" me-
dieval. Indeed, as Gyula Klima's discussion in this volume makes
clear, the philosophical and theological stakes in this problem are
very high, involving the possibility of science and the intelligibility
of discourse about God. The rise of interdisciplinary programs in cog-
nitive science and recent critiques of the Cartesian epistemological
tradition make certain aspects of medieval philosophical psychology
more accessible now than formerly. On the other hand, Descartes's
newly affirmed relation to Augustine means that there are medieval
sources for Cartesian as well as non-Cartesian ideas of mind and self.
Robert Pasnau's chapter on human nature takes advantage of both of
these medieval–modern connections.

There are similar points for engagement in moral philosophy. In
the last fifty years philosophers have displayed substantial interest
in moral psychology and virtue ethics, central concerns in Bonnie
Kent's chapter on the moral life. Medieval political thought has be-
come both more intelligible and more relevant to current concerns
for a number of reasons. Recent scholarship has led to greater aware-
ness of the role of medieval thinkers in providing foundations for
modern political thought. Conversely, widespread current criticism
of modern secularism and a recognition that the assumptions of
modernity are by no means inevitable are clarified by reflection on
contrasting assumptions in medieval thought. It is not only medieval

political thought proper, as presented here by Annabel Brett, that has gained significance. Our debates today about "modern" or "western" values are given sharper point by the claims now urged for Islamic tradition and, in a critical part of our world, for traditional Judaism. The tensions between philosophy and religious faith in medieval Islamic and Jewish culture, treated among other topics by Thérèse Druart and Idit Dobbs-Weinstein in their chapters on philosophy in Islam and Jewish philosophy, thus provide additional ways into medieval thought from where we stand today.[1]

OTHERNESS

In spite of such promising points of entry as the preceding, much of medieval philosophy is apt to seem inaccessible, even for those who are prepared to approach it sympathetically. In its otherworldliness it may seem to have been written in another world, and one may suspect that even the parts that seem assimilable are not entirely what they seem. There is a distinctively medieval conception of *eternity*, for example, as John Marenbon's discussion in chapter 2 makes clear, and it is taken very seriously. Again, the idea of *hierarchy* presented in the same chapter by D. E. Luscombe is ubiquitous in medieval thought, ordering social classes, the powers of the soul, and the angels of heaven. In devoting a chapter to these two ideas, we resist the temptation to fold what is "other" in medieval thought into what appears familiar.

Even the apparently familiar has aspects of otherness, however. Once more, some examples. The scholastic development of Aristotelian and Stoic virtue ethics places the classical virtues in a scheme crowned by the "theological" virtues of faith, hope, and Christian love of God and neighbor. Medieval discussions of friendship, civic happiness, and the philosophical life, as presented in James McEvoy's chapter on ultimate goods, are of great interest, yet the ultimate interest of most of the authors considered is in beatitude – not earthly happiness but eternal bliss. The Aristotelian inspiration for medieval metaphysics is clear, but in the medieval period there is a huge expansion of often very confident discussion of a divine reality dealt with by Aristotle briefly and tentatively. Accordingly, Stephen Menn's chapter on metaphysics in this volume is predominantly concerned with the being of God. Similar observations of the

unfamiliar in the midst of the familiar could be made regarding each
of the topics mentioned in preceding paragraphs. How is this mixture
of sameness and difference to be understood?

History helps. Steven Marrone's presentation of medieval philos-
ophy in context (chapter 1) shows when and how the more remote
and the more modern-seeming strands of medieval thought arose and
came to be woven together. There were important changes in atti-
tudes toward philosophy and in the very character of philosophy in
its millennial medieval career. Virtually all medieval thinkers carried
with them something of the classical Greek and Roman conception
of philosophy as a way of life, but the styles of the philosophical life
varied markedly over centuries and milieux. (This opening historical
narrative provides food for thought, incidentally, on the topic of a –
possible? imminent? – "death of philosophy." The moral suggested
by the medieval experience is that philosophy indeed can die, but
that it has a tendency to rise from the dead.) The final section of
chapter 1, on the sources and genres of medieval philosophical writ-
ing, provides further reference points. In this section, the place of
authority in medieval thought is briefly discussed, the availability
of classical philosophical texts in different places and times in the
medieval world is charted, and an account is given of the forms in
which philosophy was published, forms often unfamiliar to the mod-
ern reader: *Sentence* commentaries, summas, quodlibeta, disputed
questions, sophismata, and the like.

WHAT IS MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY?

To speak of historical changes in the character of philosophy prompts
some nonhistorical questions, however. Given such changes, we may
well ask: is medieval philosophy in any sense the same as philoso-
phy as we know it? If not, what is it, and should we really call it
philosophy at all? An answer (preliminary to the one this Compan-
ion as a whole provides) can be given by way of an idea just referred
to, the classical idea of philosophy as a way of life. If virtually all
medieval thinkers carried something of this idea with them, few
regarded themselves as "philosophers" in what we might think of,
without defining it precisely, as the classical or modern sense of
the term. It will be useful to elicit the difference between medieval
philosophical ways of life and philosophy in this other sense by

stages. Augustine, the most influential thinker in the West in our period and a case study in tensions also felt in Islamic and Jewish thought, will serve as a leading example.

The course of Augustine's life was set by his reading of Cicero's lost dialogue *Hortensius*. He says that this text inflamed him with a desire for "wisdom." What he thought himself to be doing in his better moments for more than twenty years after reading Cicero was pursuing wisdom. So far so good. The quest for wisdom in some sense identifies the philosopher even now, and this quest must shape the philosopher's life in at least some respects, if only in the choice of conversations to join. Augustine's quest carried him through a number of intellectual positions, including Manichaean dualism, skepticism, and Neoplatonism, to what he sometimes called "our philosophy," a genuine "understanding," as he saw it, of reality, truth, and the good, a share of the wisdom he had been after and which philosophers had been seeking over the centuries. Again, so far so good. If we think of philosophy as the quest for wisdom, a philosopher as someone engaged in such a quest, and a philosophy as what such a seeker arrives at, Augustine must be regarded as a philosopher, and the understanding he achieved must be regarded as a philosophy.

In setting out "our philosophy," however, Augustine sometimes characterizes "the philosophers" as antagonists or, at best, necessarily unsuccessful aspirants to the wisdom he had found. For what Augustine means by "our philosophy" is a specifically Christian understanding of things, an understanding possible only through faith. "Unless you believe you shall not understand" (Isaiah 7:9) became the motto for a whole tradition of "faith seeking understanding" which defined the quest for wisdom in the Latin West from Augustine through Anselm and beyond. "The philosophers" Augustine characterized as adversaries lacked faith. Thus, for him, philosophy as engaged in by philosophers was necessarily abortive and hence not the best example of what philosophy ought to be.[2]

Here is where we run up against a more familiar conception of philosophy. Far from thinking that success in philosophy is impossible without religious faith, a modern reader may assume the contrary: that philosophy is defined by *not* proceeding on the basis of faith. Philosophy, it is commonly thought, proceeds within the limits, or on the basis, or by the light, of "reason alone." This does not

preclude the same person's having faith and doing philosophy, but it does entail that philosophizing and believing are distinct activities. From this point of view, the fact that Augustine makes no such distinction renders him a suspicious character. He is apt to seem rhetorically proselytizing where a true philosopher ought to be disinterestedly rational.

The difficulty should not be exaggerated. One can always gather from thinkers in Augustine's tradition anything that seems interesting from a different perspective. Augustine's conception of the mind as a trinity of memory, understanding, and will, each in its own way "comprehending" the others, might stimulate useful thought quite apart from Augustine's own use of this analysis to gain understanding of Christian belief in God as triune. The same could be said of other trinities in medieval thought. Likewise, Augustine's theory of language as involving an inner, mental word was for him a way to tie the understanding of spoken and written signs to divine illumination. Even in the Middle Ages, however, this theory was developed in ways free of specific theological import. It should also be remembered that Augustine's project was faith seeking *understanding*. This means that the results of his quest for wisdom can often be formulated in systematically related propositions that can be examined for the virtue of consistency and might have other "purely philosophical" virtues as well.

Accommodation of medieval philosophy to a "reason alone" view of the discipline is still easier for the latter part of our period. This is because the purely reasonable view is not in fact distinctively classical or modern. It is actually a medieval conception, enshrined most famously in the first *quaestio* of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. There Thomas seeks to determine the relation of theology (*sacra doctrina*) to "the philosophical disciplines." The line of demarcation he proposes is set precisely at what can be discovered by "reason" ("human reason" or "natural reason"). This is philosophy (including the natural sciences). Sacred doctrine may use the methods and results of philosophy, but its own foundations are truths disclosed by God in "supernatural" revelation. For Aquinas, then, and for the majority of late medieval thinkers in the Latin West, there is a clear distinction between philosophy and theology that usually allows us to mark off philosophical ideas from the rest of their thought on a basis they themselves have provided,

one that seems to square, furthermore, with modern views of the subject.

In this Companion we will take advantage of both paths of accommodation just sketched. That is, we will often attempt to extract material of independent philosophical interest from Augustinian faith-based thought, and in presenting the ideas of thinkers who distinguished between philosophy as reason and theology as revelation we will focus primarily on what the authors would themselves take to be philosophical. It would, however, be a disservice to philosophy in any sense of the term to follow such policies too rigidly. The relationship of philosophy to biblical or qur'anic religion is too pervasive a theme in medieval thought and too fruitful a stimulus to self-awareness in its contrast with typical modern assumptions to be muted in the interest of quick access from the direction of current philosophy. Accordingly, instead of attempting to deal with the interactions of religion and philosophy in a single chapter ("Faith and Reason," say), we will consider them in different chapters as they occur in different contexts. For example, medieval understanding of God's creation of the universe *ex nihilo* will be discussed along with medieval understanding of natural processes. Central concepts in moral philosophy, such as virtue and vice, will be discussed along with related theological concepts, such as merit and sin. More generally, when we extract elements of independent philosophical interest from texts inspired by faith seeking understanding (or by an interest in using philosophy to provide "preambles to faith," as in Aquinas), we do so without prejudice to the religious projects in which the medieval authors of our texts were engaged. In this volume, Augustine counts as a philosopher not only for what he says that may seem reasonable apart from faith, but also for his pursuit of intelligibility in Christian believing. The same inclusive principle applies to Islamic and Jewish thinkers as well as to Augustine's western successors.

GOING FURTHER

I have been arguing that medieval philosophy is worth studying both for what is or seems familiar in it and for what there is in it or about it that differs from philosophy as usually practiced today. If the succeeding chapters confirm this double claim, readers will wish to pursue the subject further. The concluding parts of the volume will

help them do so. For purposes of orientation, P. J. FitzPatrick and John Haldane show in chapter 13, on the presence of medieval philosophy in later thought, how medieval philosophy itself has gone further, indicating some of the medieval elements in Renaissance and early modern philosophy and sketching the present state of scholarly interest in our subject. Thomas Williams then discusses the problems of transmission and translation that must be taken into account in any ongoing engagement with the epoch of philosophy introduced here. A further aid to going further is the bibliography. References to major texts and studies in the body of the volume and in the section of brief biographies of major thinkers are keyed to works listed in the bibliography, which also includes other resources.

A FINAL IMAGE: MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY AND FREEDOM

Perhaps the best single representation of medieval philosophy as a whole is Boethius's image of philosophy as a beautiful woman offering freedom of intellect and spirit in even the most miserable of circumstances. The picture is drawn, in five books of superb prose and poetry, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Imprisoned in the early sixth century on charges of treason against a king in whose administration he had held the highest posts, Boethius was sick with grief, when, as he tells us, philosophy appeared to him, chided him for placing his happiness in things subject to the vicissitudes of fortune, and showed him that true happiness is to be found in God, the supreme Good and providential ruler of the universe. The religious vision animating this and much other medieval philosophy did not preclude – in some cases it even demanded – rigorously secular treatment of secular subjects. Furthermore, there was not universal agreement on the capacity of philosophy to produce the liberating results we find in Boethius, and there are even medieval materials for the critique of religion as myth and the rejection of religious institutions as corrupt. The serious consideration of more hopeful views in the Middle Ages was itself a kind of liberation, however, and this mindset arguably heightened the quality of thought in every area of philosophy. This framework for the medieval pursuit of wisdom is one important reason among others why medieval philosophy can be presented in this volume as a potentially liberating resource for the reader's own pursuit of wisdom, wherever that pursuit may lead.

Introduction   9

NOTES

1. A few chapters elsewhere in the volume are concerned exclusively with
    the Latin West, but references to Muslim and Jewish philosophy in other
    chapters, especially in chapter 6, give some impression of the intercul-
    tural scope of medieval philosophy. Further comparative work is needed.
2. For a more nuanced account of faith seeking understanding as
    Augustine's charter for Christian philosophy than I have given, see
    N. Kretzmann [71]. Also see E. Gilson [68] 25–111 and C. N. Cochrane
    [398] 399–455.

STEVEN P. MARRONE

1 Medieval philosophy in context

What was it like to do philosophy in the Middle Ages? In this chapter I will try to answer that question by looking at relevant sociopolitical and economic circumstances, specific institutional settings for practicing philosophy, and several competing or cooperating intellectual currents. At the end of the chapter, I will say something about the place of authority in medieval thought, the philosophical sources available to medieval thinkers at different points in the period, and the literary genres into which they put their own ideas.

Briefly, the story runs as follows. What we know as medieval philosophy emerged in the late Roman Empire from a surprisingly complete mutual accommodation of Christian belief and classical thought. It then passed through centuries of dormancy in the West, while at the same time it began afresh in the Islamic world. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries philosophy reemerged in a new Europe, in altered form and against resistance. Then, both augmented and challenged by the work of Islamic and Jewish thinkers, it enjoyed in the thirteenth century a golden age of systematic analysis and speculation corresponding to a new degree of rationalization in politics and society. And finally? The significance of fourteenth-century thought remains contested, despite substantial recent scholarship demonstrating its brilliance. As my narrative ends, therefore, readers will need to move from context to content, acquainting themselves in succeeding chapters with the ideas and arguments on which their own assessment of medieval philosophy, not just the fourteenth century, must depend.

Before beginning, we should notice an obvious but important fact. Medieval thinkers did not know that they were medieval. The expression "Middle Age" (Latin *medium aevum*; thence *medievalis*,

10