Character of medieval philosophy

Medieval philosophy is characteristically theological: with the possible exceptions of Avicenna and Averroes, medieval thinkers did not consider themselves philosophers at all. Their concerns are theological: for them, the philosophers were the ancient pagan writers such as Plato and Aristotle. However, the theological works of medieval writers use the ideas and logical techniques of the ancient philosophers to address difficult theological questions, and points of doctrine. Thomas Aquinas, following Peter Damian, argued that philosophy is the handmaiden of theology (ancilla theologiae).

The three principles that underlie all their work are the use of logic, dialectic and analysis to discover the truth, known as ratio, respect for the insights of ancient philosophers, particularly Aristotle, and deference to their authority; and the obligation to co-ordinate the insights of philosophy with theological teaching and revelation.

One of the most heavily debated topics of the period was that of faith versus reason. Avicenna and Averroes both leaned more on the side of reason. Augustine said that he would never allow his philosophical investigations to go beyond the authority of God, and Anselm attempted to defend against what he saw as partly an assault on faith, with an approach allowing for both faith and reason. The Augustinian solution to the faith/reason problem is to (1) believe, and then (2) seek to understand.

Early Medieval Christian Philosophy

The boundaries of the early medieval period are a matter of controversy. It is generally agreed that it begins with Augustine (354 – 430) who strictly belongs to the classical period, and ends with the lasting revival of learning in the late eleventh century, at the beginning of the high medieval period.

After the collapse of the Roman empire, Western Europe lapsed into the so-called Dark Ages, and there was little intellectual activity in this period. Monasteries were the only focus of learning, possibly a result of a rule of St Benedict’s in 525 which required monks to read the Bible daily, and his suggestion that at the beginning of Lent, a book be given to each monk. In later periods monks were used for training administrators and churchmen.

Early Christian thought, particularly in the patristic period, tends to be intuitional and mystical, and is less reliant on reason and logical argument. It also places more emphasis on the sometimes mystical doctrines of Plato, and less upon the systematic thinking of Aristotle. Much of the work of Aristotle was unknown in the West in this period. Scholars relied on translations by Boethius into Latin of Aristotle’s Categories, the logical work On Interpretation, and his Latin translation of Porphyry’s Isagoge, a commentary on Aristotle’s Categories.

Two Roman philosophers had a great influence on the development of medieval philosophy: Augustine and Boethius. Augustine is regarded as the greatest of the Church Fathers. He is primarily a theologian and a devotional writer, but much of his writing is philosophical. His themes are truth, God, the human soul, the meaning of history, the state, sin and salvation. For over a thousand years there was hardly a Latin work of theology or philosophy that did not quote his writing, or invoke his authority. Some of his writing had an influence on the development of early modern philosophy, such as that of Descartes. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480–c.525) was a Christian philosopher born in Rome to an ancient and important family. He became consul in 510 in the kingdom of the Ostrogoths. His influence on the early medieval period was also marked (so much so that it is sometimes called the Boethian period). He intended to translate all the works of Aristotle and Plato from the original Greek into Latin, and translated many of Aristotle’s logical works, such as On Interpretation, and the Categories. He wrote commentaries on these works, and on the Isagoge by Porphyry (a commentary on the Categories). This introduced the problem of universals to the medieval world.

The first significant renewal of learning in the West came when Charlemagne, advised by Peter of Pisa and Alcuin of York, attracted the scholars of England and Ireland, and by imperial decree in 787 A.D. established schools in every abbey in his empire. These schools, from which the name Scholasticism is derived, became centres of medieval learning.

Johannes Scotus Eriugena (c. 815 - 877), successor of Alcuin of York as head of the Palace School was an Irish theologian and Neoplatonist philosopher. He is notable for having translated and
made commentaries upon the work of Pseudo-Dionysius. Around this period several doctrinal controversies emerged, such as the question of whether God had predestined some for salvation and some for damnation. Eriugena was called in to settle this dispute. At the same time Paschasius Radbertus raised an important question about the real presence of Christ at the Eucharist. Is the host the same as Christ's historical body? How can it be present at many places and many times? Radbertus argued that Christ's real body is present, veiled by the appearance of bread and wine, and is present at all places and all times, by means of God's incomprehensible power.

**Islamic philosophy in the Middle Ages**

Whereas Judaism and Christianity began as a religion of small groups, Islam developed as the religion of an expanding empire. Within a hundred years of Mohammed's death in 632 AD, military conquest extended the Islamic world to India, North Africa and Southern Spain.

As a result, a variety of different communities came under Muslim rule, and Islam came into contact with the theological systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastranism, and the philosophy of India and Greece. This led Islamic theologians to use philosophical ideas and principles to interpret Koranic doctrines.

The first stage of this process was the translation into Arabic of Greek philosophical and scientific works that had been preserved by Eastern Christians in Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt. The translators were mostly Nestorian and Jacobite Christians, working in the two hundred years following the early Abbasid period (c. 800). The most important translator of this group was the Syriac-speaking Christian Hunayn Ibn Ishaq (809-873), known to the Latins as Joannitius. The texts were first translated into Syriac, then into Arabic. Despite this process, the translations were generally accurate, aiming for a literal reading rather than elegance.

The next stage was the development of Islamic theology by the Mutakallimun. These were divided into the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites. The Mu'tazilites originated in groups that met in Basrah and Baghdad to discuss how Greek philosophical ideas might help to resolve certain theological problems, such as divine unity, and how human beings can be free even though God is omnipotent. They also developed proofs of the creation of the world, using Christian Neoplatonist ideas. The Ash'arites (founded by Al-Ash'ari, 873-935) tried to clarify Koranic doctrines. They denied the existence of any causation except through God, and therefore denied the freedom of human will.

Al-Kindi (801–873) is generally regarded as the first Aristotelian philosopher. He advocated the independent study of philosophy, and also wrote on science and logic. Al-Razi (865–c. 925), by contrast, defended Plato against Aristotle, who he regarded a corrupter of philosophy. Aristotelianism continued with Al-Farabi (870-930), while Ibn Sina, known to the Latins as Avicenna (980-1037), developed his own school of thought known as Avicennism, which reconciled Islamic theology with Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism. The Avicennian school of philosophy had a lasting impact on Islamic philosophy through to the time of Mulla Sadra in the 16th century, while it also attracted a following among Christian philosophers in medieval Europe.

Islamic Aristotelianism reached its height with Ibn Rushd, known to Europe as Averroes. Averroes in turn denounced Ghazali's criticisms of Aristotelianism, although he is best known in the West for his commentaries on Aristotle. Hebrew translations of his work also had a lasting impact on Jewish philosophy. Averroes' school of thought is known as Averroism.

Works (particularly commentaries) in the Islamic philosophical tradition were introduced in the Latin West gradually from the 11th century on, by means of translations. These had a great influence on the development of Medieval Scholasticism.

**High Middle Ages**

The period from the middle of the eleventh century to the middle of the fourteenth century is known as the 'High medieval' or 'scholastic' period. It is generally agreed to begin with Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) an Italian philosopher, theologian, and church official who is famous as the originator of the ontological argument for the existence of God.

The 13th and early 14th centuries are generally regarded as the high period of scholasticism. The early 13th century witnessed the culmination of the recovery of Greek philosophy. Schools of translation grew up in Italy and Sicily, and eventually in the rest of Europe. Scholars such as Adelard...
of Bath travelled to Sicily and the Arab world, translating works on astronomy and mathematics, including the first complete translation of Euclid’s Elements. Powerful Norman kings gathered men of knowledge from Italy and other areas into their courts as a sign of their prestige. William of Moerbeke’s translations and editions of Greek philosophical texts in the middle half of the thirteenth century helped in forming a clearer picture of Greek philosophy, and particularly of Aristotle, than was given by the Arabic versions they had previously relied on, and which had distorted or obscured the relation between Platonic and Aristotelian systems of philosophy. His work formed the basis of the major commentaries that followed.

The universities developed in the large cities of Europe during this period, and rival clerical orders within the church began to battle for political and intellectual control over these centers of educational life. The two main orders founded in this period were the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The Franciscans were founded by Francis of Assisi in 1209. Their leader in the middle of the century was Bonaventure, a traditionalist who defended the theology of Augustine and the philosophy of Plato, incorporating only a little of Aristotle in with the more neoplatonist elements. Following Anselm, Bonaventure supposed that reason can only discover truth when philosophy is illuminated by religious faith. Other important Franciscan writers were Duns Scotus, Peter Auriol and William of Ockham.

By contrast, the Dominican order, founded by St Dominic in 1215 placed more emphasis on the use of reason and made extensive use of the new Aristotelian sources derived from the East, and Moorish Spain. The great representatives of Dominican thinking in this period were Albertus Magnus and (especially) Thomas Aquinas, whose artful synthesis of Greek rationalism and Christian doctrine eventually came to define Catholic philosophy. Aquinas placed more emphasis on reason and argumentation, and was one of the first to use the new translation of Aristotle’s metaphysical and epistemological writing. This was a significant departure from the Neoplatonic and Augustinian thinking that had dominated much of early Scholasticism. Aquinas showed how it was possible to incorporate much of the philosophy of Aristotle without falling into the "errors" of the Commentator Averroes.

**Topics in Medieval Philosophy**

All the main branches of philosophy today (except possibly epistemology) were a part of Medieval philosophy. Medieval philosophy also included most of the areas originally established by the pagan philosophers of antiquity, particularly Aristotle. However, the discipline now called Philosophy of religion was probably a unique development of the medieval era, and many of the problems which define the subject first took shape in the Middle Ages, in forms which are still recognisable today.

**Theology**

Medieval philosophy is characteristically theological. Subjects which were discussed or developed in this period include

- The problem of the compatibility of the divine attributes: how are the attributes traditionally ascribed to the Supreme Being, such as unlimited power, knowledge of all things, infinite goodness, existence outside time, immateriality and so on, logically consistent with one another?
- The problem of evil. The classical philosophers had speculated on the nature of evil, but the problem of how an all-powerful, all-knowing and kind God could create a system of things in which evil existed, first arose in the medieval period.
- The problem of free will. A similar problem was to explain 'divine foreknowledge' - God's knowledge of what will happen in the future - is compatible with our belief in our own free will.

**Metaphysics**

After the 'rediscovery' of Aristotle’s Metaphysics in the mid twelfth century, many scholastics wrote commentaries on this work (particularly Aquinas and Scotus). The problem of universals was one of the main problems engaged during that period. Other subjects included

- Hylomorphism - development of the Aristotelian doctrine that individual things are a compound of material and form (the statue is a compound of granite, and the form sculpted into it)
- Existence - being qua being
• Causality. Discussion of causality consisted mostly of commentaries on Aristotle, mainly the Physics, On the Heavens, On Generation and Corruption. The approach to this subject area was uniquely medieval, the rational investigation of the universe being viewed as a way of approaching God. Duns Scotus' proof of the existence of God is based on the notion of causality.

• Individuation. The problem of individuation is to explain how we individuate or numerically distinguish the members of any kind for which it is given. The problem arose when it was required to explain how individual angels of the same species differ from one another. Angels are immaterial, and their numerical difference cannot be explained by the different matter they are made of. Important contributors to this discussion were Aquinas and Scotus.

**Philosophy of Mind**

Medieval philosophy of mind is based on Aristotle's De Anima, another work discovered in the Latin West in the twelfth century. It was regarded as a branch of the philosophy of nature. Some of the topics discussed in this area include

• Divine illumination. The doctrine of Divine illumination is an old and important alternative to naturalism. It holds that humans need a special assistance from God in their ordinary thinking. The doctrine is most closely associated with Augustine and his scholastic followers. It reappeared in a different form in the early modern era.

• theories of demonstration,

• mental representation. The idea that mental states have 'intentionality', i.e. despite being a state of the mind, they are able to represent things outside the mind, is intrinsic to the modern philosophy of mind. It has its origins in medieval philosophy. (The word 'intentionality' was revived by Franz Brentano who was intending to reflect medieval usage). Ockham is well-known for his theory that language signifies mental states primarily by convention, real things secondarily, whereas the corresponding mental states signify real things of themselves and necessarily.

**Nature of God**

Aquinas believed that the existence of God is neither obvious nor unprovable. In the *Summa Theologica*, he considered in great detail five reasons for the existence of God. These are widely known as the *quinquae viae*, or the "Five Ways."

Concerning the nature of God, Aquinas felt the best approach, commonly called the *via negativa*, is to consider what God is not. This led him to propose five statements about the divine qualities:

1. God is simple, without composition of parts, such as body and soul, or matter and form.
2. God is perfect, lacking nothing. That is, God is distinguished from other beings on account of God's complete actuality.
3. God is infinite. That is, God is not infinite in the ways that created beings are physically, intellectually, and emotionally limited. This infinity is to be distinguished from infinity of size and infinity of number.
4. God is immutable, incapable of change on the levels of God's essence and character.
5. God is one, without diversification within God's self. The unity of God is such that God's essence is the same as God's existence. In Aquinas's words, "in itself the proposition 'God exists' is necessarily true, for in it subject and predicate are the same."

In this approach, he is following, among others, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides.

**Nature of the Trinity**

Aquinas argued that God, while perfectly united, also is perfectly described by Three Interrelated Persons. These three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are constituted by their relations within the essence of God. The Father generates the Son (or the Word) by the relation of self-awareness. This eternal generation then produces an eternal Spirit "who enjoys the divine nature as the Love of God, the Love of the Father for the Word."

This Trinity exists independently from the world. It transcends the created world, but the Trinity also decided to communicate God's self and God's goodness to human beings. This takes place through the Incarnation of the Word in the person of Jesus Christ and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (indeed, the very essence of the Trinity itself) within those who have experienced salvation by God.