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Introduction to Medieval Philosophy

Overview

What Is Medieval Philosophy?

History and Historiography

Translations

Medieval philosophical traditions

The Medieval World-View

Free Will

Literature

(Very Brief) History

Circa 500–1500

- 476 Roman Empire falls
- 622 Muhammad from Mecca to Medina
- 800 Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor
- 827 Muslims invade Sicily
- 1054 Great Schism
- 1099 First Crusade
- 1117 (?) University of Oxford founded
- 1147–49: Second Crusade
- 1150 University of Paris founded
- 1195 Castile is overtaken by the Caliphate
- 1204 Sack of Constantinople
- 1215 Magna Carta
- 1337 Start of the 100 Years War
- 1347 Black Death
- 1439 Invention of the Printing Press
- 1492 Columbus reaches the New World
- 1517 Luther's 95 Theses

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Europe (1190)



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Characteristics of Medieval Philosophy

Was there Medieval Philosophy at all?

“There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead.... The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers either of Greece or of modern times” (Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 463).

- Role of religion(s)
- Most usual literary genre: the **commentaries**
- Common root: the ancient Greek tradition



Translation Movements



- ① **Greek → Arabic**, 8–10th century; sometimes via Syriac
- ② **Greek → Latin**, almost continuously, sometimes via Arabic. Boethius (logic texts of Aristotle); then by the 13th century all Aristotle and some Plato.
- ③ **Arabic → Latin**, 12th–13th century; Toledo and Sicily
- ④ Arabic → Hebrew, Latin → Greek, Latin → Hebrew, Hebrew → Latin ...

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Philosophical Traditions and Philosophers

Latin, Arabic, Jewish, Greek (Byzantine) + ???

- Aurelius Augustinus (d. 430)
- Boethius (d. 524)
- Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109)
- Al-Ghazali (d. 1111)
- Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274)
- Henry of Ghent (d. 1293)
- John Duns Scotus (d. 1308)
- Marguerite of Porete (d. 1310)
- Josef Albo (d. 1444)

But why care about historical details at all?

Mendicant orders, universities, manuscripts...



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How to Read Medieval Philosophy?

- Most texts belong to some very particular genre, often associated with teaching (quodlibetal questions, commentaries, etc.) – it's helpful to know the general characteristics of that genre.
- **Keep a dictionary!** Concepts, names, etc.
- Keep a list of unknown terms.



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① Strong theological tradition

- Christian world: Bible; Augustine; Church Fathers; Peter Lombard's *Sentences*
- Islamic world: Quran
- Jewish world: Hebrew scriptures – Torah, Talmud

② The “new” philosophy / science

- by and large Aristotelian
- a model of the universe
- science as “saving the appearances” + some methodological principles about how to choose between theories

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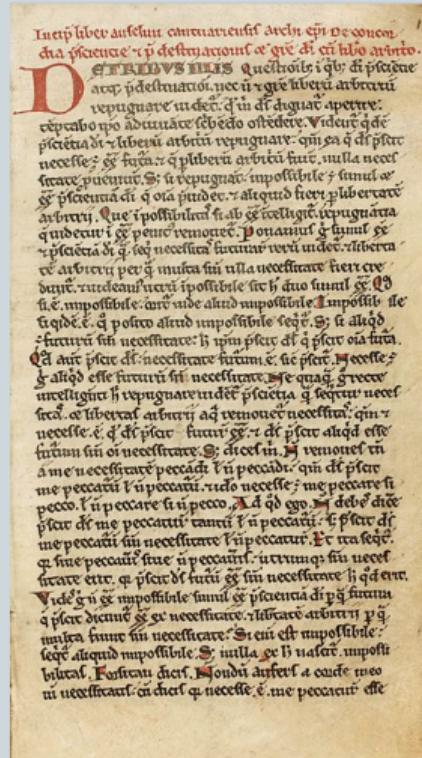
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The Medieval World-View

Strong theological tradition + new philosophy/science
→ **What to do with it?**

- Arabic world: Avicenna (Ibn Sina) vs. Al-Ghazali; Averroes (Ibn Rushd)
- Christian world:
 - Early condemnations in Paris
 - Aristotle banned, repeatedly (early 13th c.)
 - But then 30 years later, mandatory curriculum!
 - Condemnations of 1277 (not explicitly against Aristotle)



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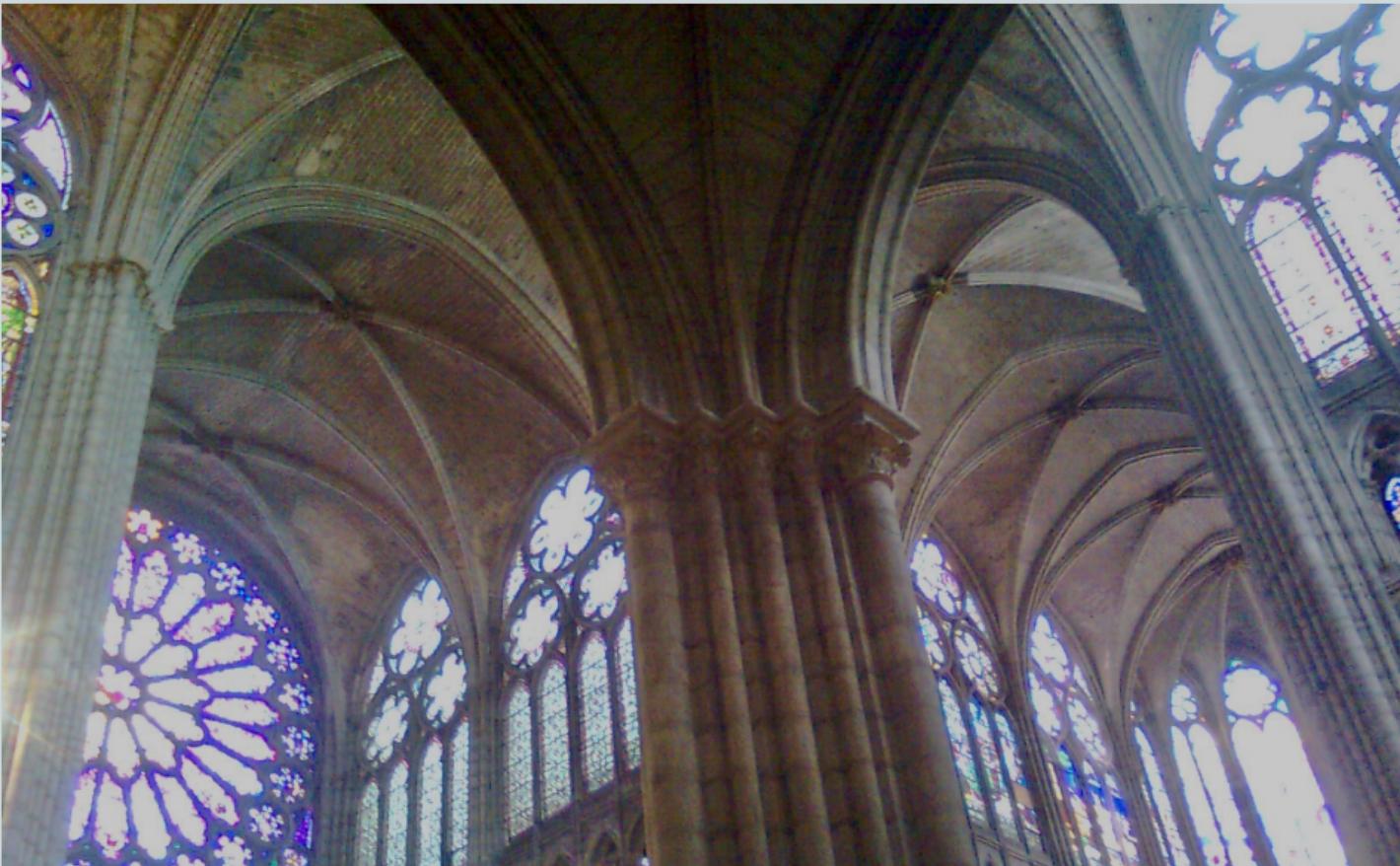
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Free Will – A (Very) Brief History

Intuitively, some of our actions are up to us – but does this mean that intuitively, we have free will?

- Greek literature, Plato, Aristotle: no notion of free will whatsoever!
- We need a notion of will, and a notion of freedom
 - Will as a mental faculty; can change without any external coercion. It's an ability that enables us to choose and then that choice brings about our actions. It's perfectible.
 - Freedom: The world does not constrain us from living a good life.
- Perhaps first emerged in Stoic philosophy (how can we – or can we? – lead a good life if the world is governed by cosmic tyrants?)
- Augustine: inherits the Stoic roots + Christianity

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Free Will – Medieval Problems

- Free will and the problem of evil – can free choices (*whose free choices?*) explain evil?
- The first bad choice – how could a good agent (angels, humans, etc.) choose badly?
- What *is* freedom, anyway? Does it imply having alternative possibilities? Does it imply the ability to do otherwise *even when you are performing an action?*
- Do we have free choice, if our intellect tells us what to do?
- Do we have free choice if God knows in advance what we're going to choose?
- How is freedom connected to the virtues? Can a virtuous agent have freedom?

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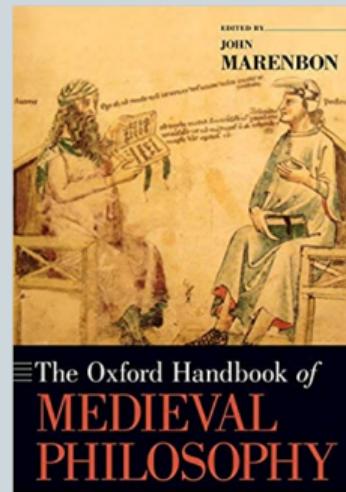
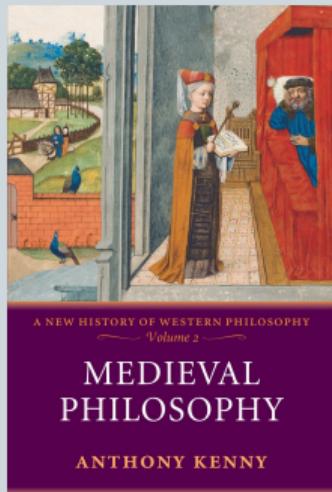
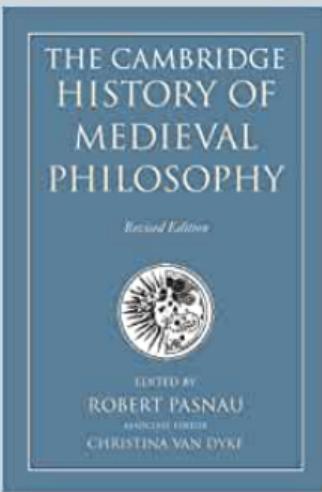
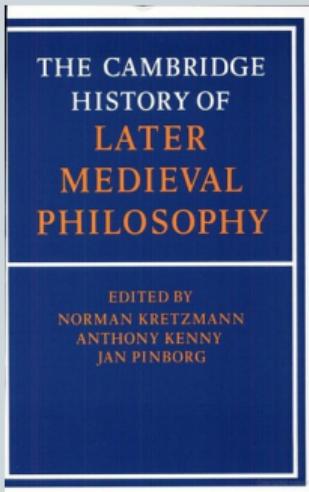
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Further Sources



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