

Some Landmarks for the Study of Medieval European Philosophy

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2. The Problem of Universals (Nominalism vs. Realism)
3. The Problem of Divine Names (Univocity, Equivocity, Analogy)
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5. The Problem of the Eternity of the World (The Introduction of Aristotle to the West)
6. The Problem of the Unity of the Agent Intellect (Aquinas vs Siger of Brabant & the "Latin Averroists")

Despite appearances, all these were vital philosophical (that is, political, moral, practical) issues, albeit fought out (and they were viciously fought out) in abstract, philosophical-theological language.

1. Philosophy and Theology. Two major positions:

A) Philosophy, theology, dogma and faith have only superficial differences.

They are ultimately grounded in the same reality which is open to both rational explanation and to Scriptural revelation. The same God is behind both. The necessity of reaching a popular audience in Scripture necessitated the use of various images that at first resist rational explanation; this recalcitrance is only temporary and can be overcome by theologians using philosophical tools.

B) Philosophy and faith are antithetical, and faith is clearly superior.

The mysteries revealed in Scripture are the only true test of faith; philosophical quibbling about logic is the work of idle hands. However, to be realistic, we can admit that the philosophic rendering of faith did serve two useful worldly functions. It was 1) a recruiting strategy of the early Church, which had targeted wealthy and educated citizens of Rome, who were also the targets of recruitment by other proselytizing faiths ("heresies" and Jews). These people, who prided themselves on their rationality, wanted to be convinced of the rational ground of faith. Perhaps they should have just believed right away, but they didn't, and since they were useful to the Church in providing the material support for the social charity network that helped recruit the poor, it was understandable why they made the effort to persuade them. 2) The assent to the philosophic rendering of faith in dogmatic theology also fostered cohesion within the Church.

The political stakes: nothing less than the entire relation of Church (faith) and State (reason).

2. Universals (Nominalism vs Realism)

"Socrates is a man." "A man is a rational animal." The first expresses the relation of individual and species. The second, that of species, genus, and specific difference. The opposing limit positions are nominalism and realism. Nominalism: universals are just names, convenient shorthands. Individuals are real and universals are just ways we have of dealing with groups of individuals. At the limit of nominalism we can create our own universals, that is, create our own ways of grouping the individuals of the world. Thus also at this limit, universals are historically and culturally relative. Realism: universals exist, they are things. In the Platonic treatment, they are ideas in the mind of God and are the most real of all. Individuals are just participations, even shadows. Aristotle has universals as substantial forms, inherent in individuals. They are thus second substances as opposed to individuals which are first substances. Most doctrines mix and match, producing various hybrids.

The political stakes: is the Church or Empire a real thing, or only a temporary name for a collection of individuals?

3. Divine Names: "God is good."

How does this predicate of goodness relate to a predication of goodness to a man? Univocity: the same sense; equivocity: completely different senses; analogy: relatively different senses. Analogy is thus difference with a "focal point." The problem: our language is oriented to everyday things: is it adequate to express God's superiority to the things He created? Negative theology says no. We can only approach God by negating the ordinary sense of words. Thus negative theologians were equivocalists. The problem is that of two worlds: how to rationally explain God's relation to the world? Negative theology blends with Neo-Platonism: God as One overflows into natural dispersion which, lacking God, wants to flow back to divine unity. The problem here is that order and hierarchy don't seem to be rationally motivated, but rather emotionally: God's love rather than God's plan seems to be the key. Univocity is most intensely felt by Duns Scotus. Here hierarchy seems to dissolve as univocity points to a naturalism and atheism/pantheism: God is everything (and hence He is not different from nature and hence this is atheism). Thomas is the major figure of analogy. God's superiority provides the reference point for discussing our goodness, which is related to it, which "participates in it," though inferior to it. Thomas hopes thereby to save hierarchy from the univocalists but to provide the rational justification for it lacking to the equivocalists.

The political stakes: how real is the hierarchy and order of medieval society? Is the superiority of rulers grounded in the superiority of God? Is that superiority rationally justified or emotionally based? What is more important in God, earthly ruler, everyday person: love or reason?

4. God's Being.

Medieval Philosophy, in keeping with Augustine's decisive move, strove to unite two different stances toward God. He was 1) a being, in fact the highest being; 2) as the successor to the neo-Platonic One, He was "beyond being." The question is thus whether God is immanent to Being or transcendent to it. The link with the Divine Names problematic should be clear. In so far as He is "beyond being," God resists discussion in any mundane language oriented to discussing the properties of beings. Explicating the God of Scripture, the highest being, with the Neoplatonic One/Good will thus always run the risk of 1) removing any personality from God by pushing Him too far "beyond being"; or 2) distorting the transcendence of God by use of mundane metaphors.

The political stakes: is the King or Emperor or Pope a being (a member of the society or Church) or the very principle of order for the kingdom (beyond the society or Church)? This conflict echoes the conflict of the German tribal system (the chief is a member of the tribe) and the later Roman imperium (the Emperor is Father of the people, not a member of the society).

5. Eternity of the World. Brought to crisis point by Aristotelian invasion.

If world has always existed, then God is only an organizer of pre-existing material, the one who brings order out of chaos. Thus in one sense he is not completely free, but is in relation to the conditions He finds with which to work. On the other hand, if God creates the very materials He works with, then He is completely free. The allied problem is that of the relation of will and reason in God and by implication in man. Is God's will so powerful that He can overcome the principle of contradiction and other fundamental "laws" of reason?

The political stakes: is the ruler (God or Emperor or King or Pope) bound to the materials he inherits (that is, the customs of the society or the laws of his predecessor)? The German chief was both a member of the tribe (see point 4 above) and bound to the customs of the tribe, where the Roman emperor was not. Thus his word was law, and that law had no necessary relation to the past laws. In that sense the Emperor "creates" a new

world, unrelated to the past, with each proclamation. The past is nothing to the free transcendent ruler who "creates out of nothing."

6. Unity of the Agent Intellect:

A. Aristotle De Anima 3.5. One of the most compact, elliptical, and even mysterious passages in Western philosophy comes in Aristotle's treatise on the "soul." There Aristotle posits an active or productive (poietic) *nous* and a passive *nous*. *Nous* basically means "insight." It's the flash of insight, the eureka experience. Contemporary neuroscience would explain it in terms of formation of resonance patterns in neural firings: things click into place and you make connections. *Nous* is thus not a thought, but the enabling of new thoughts or even new patterns of thought. It's thus the highest mental capacity, and Aristotle, in perhaps a reflection of his Platonic heritage, calls it "divine" and "immortal." Aristotle likens it to light, tapping into one of the most basic Western philosophical metaphors.

B. The Arab commentators. In the Arabic tradition, a question arose as to the number of the agent intellect. That is, does each one of us have our own agent intellects, or do we share in one single agent intellect?

C. Personal immortality. Now this becomes a theological issue, not just a philosophical issue of epistemology, if one equates the agent intellect with the immortal soul. (This may or may not do violence to Aristotle's notion of psyche, but the important point is that this is how the issue was phrased in Paris.) Now if there is only one agent intellect, it seems hard to uphold the notion of personal immortality, as we would only be sharing in one agent intellect when we have insight, and when we die, our sharing in that single intellect would cease and we would be re-absorbed into the divine unity as it were. This was the interpretation offered by the 12thC Spanish Islamic philosopher Averroes and championed in Paris by Siger of Brabant. Aquinas objected and upheld the multiplicity of agent intellects and hence personal immortality.

D. Philosophy and politics. All this raises an extremely important question, the relation of philosophical work to contemporary political power structures. For, obviously, a major form of social control in medieval Europe was reward/punishment in the afterlife. Any threat to notions of personal immortality, and hence to reward/punishment in afterlife was a threat to social stability. After all, all societies rely on internalized codes, the cop in the head, for there could never be enough cops to physically, externally keep people in line (first of all, the cops would themselves have to be kept in line, as the NOPD knows all too well!). So then what is the connection of Aquinas' upholding the multiplicity of agent intellects and hence personal immortality to systems of social control? Or in other words, the Church as intellectual institution and the Church as implanter of cops in people's heads? Did Aquinas consciously realize the social and political implications of his stance? Or was it that the system needed protection, and that someone was going to do it, whether it be Aquinas or someone else? These are extremely deep and tough questions to ponder!