

**John Marenbon (ed.)**

*The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy.*

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This *Handbook* belongs on the reading list of all medieval philosophy courses, particularly those hoping to bring the thought of this period into contact with contemporary analytic philosophy. Part I provides a very thorough survey of the period, beginning with a contribution from the editor on the late ancient background to medieval philosophy. We are then treated to contributions on specific topics and figures from Greek, Arabic and Jewish thought before Part I turns to the more familiar Latin figures, with coverage extending from the earliest beginnings in Boethius to the early modern period. Part II is devoted to issues in medieval philosophy chosen with an eye to what is likely to be of interest to those familiar with contemporary analytic philosophy. There are sections on *Logic and the Philosophy of Language*, *Metaphysics and Epistemology*, *Moral Psychology*, *Ethics*, *Political Philosophy and Aesthetics*, and finally *Philosophy of Religion*. The contributors are all on top of their brief, and the collection provides a valuable picture of the current state of the art.

The *Handbook* has 33 chapters, not including the Introduction, and covers such an extensive and diverse array of thinkers, time periods and topics that a review of this length cannot hope to touch on all of its significant strengths. What a review of this nature can usefully provide is an assessment of the collection in the light of the editor's aspirations for the *Handbook* as set out in the Introduction. Indeed one of the most interesting features of the *Handbook* is Marenbon's introductory remarks, for these give his assessment of the current state of the field.

*Oxford Handbooks* in general are designed to show the state of the art in a specialized field. This is particularly challenging in the case of medieval philosophy because there are two broad aspects to the field that do not always sit comfortably together. On the one hand there is the on-going challenge facing the historian of recovering the thought of the period. To a significant extent this has been done in the case of the Latins, although even here it is far from complete. But as Part I of the *Handbook* shows, this historical work is really only now getting under way regarding late Greek, Arabic and Jewish thought. On the other hand there is the philosophical task of assessing the merits of the thought of the period and its possible significance for philosophers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To an extent the historical and philosophical tasks are distinct challenges calling for distinct skill sets; but it is difficult adequately to assess the philosophical significance of a piece of work if it is not properly understood, which means seeing it in its historical context; and it is difficult to know what aspects of an author's thought are worth bringing to light for a contemporary audience if the historian lacks awareness of the contemporary philosophical scene. Scholars working in medieval philosophy have always to balance the competing demands of both aspects of their field, and they always run the risk of getting that balance wrong. For the editor of a *Handbook* on medieval philosophy the challenge is to ensure that these two distinct efforts are represented, and, hopefully, found to complement each other.

In his opening remarks Marenbon tells us that he encouraged his contributors to "provide an introduction to thinking philosophically about a topic discussed in the Middle Ages" (p. 3). In doing so Marenbon puts the emphasis on the philosophical aspect of the field. But he opens the

*Handbook* with the historical survey, the aims of which are: (1) To provide a wider context for the detailed study of issues, and the fullest up-to-date chronological-geographical account of medieval philosophy; (2) To show that there is much more to medieval philosophy than the Latin greats like Aquinas, Scotus Ockham and Buridan, and that the work of the late Greek, Arabic and Hebrew philosophers is as yet largely unexplored; and, most importantly, (3) “to show that studying the philosophy of the past is a type of history: the study of thinking that went on in particular places and times, in a certain order and with certain internal relations” (p. 4).

Now Marenbon recognizes that this third aim is in at least *prima facie* tension with his wish to bring medieval philosophy into contact with contemporary analytic philosophy. For whatever philosophy is, it is not history. Some of his most interesting remarks are designed to show that this tension is merely *prima facie*. And it is here that his assessment of the current state of the field comes to light.

He points out that the very idea of bringing medieval philosophy into contact with contemporary analytic philosophy has “a rather old-fashioned air about it” (p. 4). This idea was bold 50 years ago, but it has now become the standard approach to medieval philosophy in philosophy departments. Trumpeting this approach as a virtue, he says, may strike some as odd since it should be taken for granted. But perhaps more ominous for Marenbon’s project, philosophers who are historians have come to stress as often as not the *differences* between the present and the past, thereby undercutting the notion that a fruitful dialogue between medieval thinkers and contemporary analytic philosophers is possible. If these charges were true, says Marenbon, they would constitute serious objections to the entire project.

Marenbon takes on the first point first, i.e., the charge that all this is rather old-fashioned. He acknowledges that it was in 1982 that Kretzmann et al. brought out the *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*. At the time it was hoped that this landmark publication would mark the beginning of the end of medieval philosophy being studied in a “philosophical ghetto”, with “specialists ignorant of contemporary philosophy and contemporary philosophers ignorant of medieval achievements” (p. 4). Marenbon notes that things have improved somewhat. But he insists that “medieval philosophy is still on the sidelines”, with many if not most major departments still lacking a medieval specialist, and most medievalists having a philological, historical or literary rather than philosophical training. Sadly, it is hard not to agree with Marenbon on this point. If bringing medieval philosophy into contact with analytic philosophy is old hat, it’s a hat we’ve rarely worn.

As to the second challenge, i.e., that there is nothing to be gained by an encounter between medieval and analytic philosophy, Marenbon accepts that the simple minded approach to historical texts that typified analytical philosophers 50 years ago – where arguments are treated in isolation, and as though they were written last week - is untenable. But he does not veer to the other extreme and insist that the considerable historical and cultural distance between us and the Middle Ages is so great as to make all dialogue fruitless. He takes the sensible approach and asks his contributors to look for “links” without assuming links will necessarily be found. In some cases there appear to be strong connections (logical consequence, mental language, states of affairs, universals); in others a looser, more indirect contribution can be found (mind and hylomorphism, body and soul, modality, parts and wholes); while in others perhaps no fruitful connections are discernable since the formulation of the problems have changed (logical form, meaning, freedom of the will). The claim then is that bringing medieval philosophy into contact with contemporary analytic thought

remains a viable and worthwhile project as long as its practitioners have a “philosophical acumen” that does “not exclude historical understanding” (p. 6). Summing up his responses Marenbon says:

“a case still needs to be made: to mainstream philosophers that medieval thinking has as much or more value for them as that of any other period of the past, and to medievalists that knowing about current concerns in philosophy will deepen their understanding of texts from the Middle Ages and enable them to communicate the interest of what they study” (p. 5).

The pertinent question then is whether the *Handbook* goes some way to making this case.

On the whole it does, although unevenly. It is disappointing that the historical survey of medieval philosophy shows less philosophical acumen than Marenbon might wish. The question that repeatedly comes to mind, particularly when reading the early chapters, is: “What could a mainstream analytic philosopher make of this?” There is much here of historical interest, to be sure; and the specialist in medieval philosophy will profit from having the unfamiliar background nicely laid out. (Germann’s contribution on Avicenna, for example, is very useful for Aquinas scholars.) Perhaps these are virtues enough to warrant their inclusion in the *Handbook*. But the philosophical import of many of the early chapters is far from obvious, and the *Handbook* would have been strengthened if that import had been made explicit.

It is not until the later chapters on Latin Philosophy that the survey really kicks into gear. Erismann’s chapter on *Latin Philosophy To 1200* is very good on setting out the leading philosophical issues of the period, and the various positions taken up; but the crucial point is that the issues discussed, particularly categorical ontology, are as alive today as they were then. Contemporary metaphysicians have much to learn from these medieval discussions, if only to avoid reinventing the wheel. Freidman’s *Latin Philosophy, 1200-1350*, provides the kind of historical background that allows the mainstream philosopher to read the Scholastics without getting hopelessly lost. It is particularly helpful, for example, in providing an account of the various genres of writing and their associated teaching methods. *This* kind of historical information allows the mainstream philosopher unfamiliar with the period to better understand a philosophical text by having it placed in its original context. Marenbon’s *Latin Philosophy, 1350-1550*, provides a useful antidote to standard approaches to the period which tend to divide medieval philosophy (studied by philosophers) from Renaissance philosophy (studied by those with an interest in the history of ideas, religion and culture). Marenbon believes that both strands of Latin thought will be better understood when seen as part of Latin Philosophy as a whole. Particularly useful here is Marenbon’s reminder that the Realism/Nominalism dispute, while ostensibly about the problem of universals, was actually about the meta-philosophical question regarding the relation of philosophy and theology. Should philosophy and theology be rigorously separated (as the Nominalists/*moderni* wished) or should philosophy, in the form of developments of the Aristotelian framework, provide a defence of the faith (as the Realists/*antiqui* maintained)? Again, it is *this* kind of historical information that the mainstream philosopher needs if they are to understand the dispute aright. Finally, Schmutz’s *Medieval Philosophy after the Middle Ages* is admirably clear in setting out the philosophical import of the period under consideration. He sets out to show that medieval figures remained important sources for early modern philosophers; that these modern philosophers saw themselves as developing medieval doctrines; and that early-modern scholasticism can explain important features of contemporary philosophy such as the realism/idealism dispute and even the Continental-Analytic

divide. Here one sees evidence of the lasting impact of medieval philosophy on the profession, an impact that should be common place in the philosophical mainstream.

However, it is to Part II of the Handbook, *Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, that mainstream philosophers ought to turn in the first instance if they are looking for an indication of how medieval thinkers might contribute to their on-going efforts at philosophical reflection. The chapter titles are self-explanatory, so readers will know which contributions will be of greatest use to them. Space considerations militate against mentioning them all, but the following are clear cut examples of discussions that are particularly relevant to contemporaries: Lenz' *Mental Language* draws explicit parallels between scholastic debates regarding the origin of structured thought and the dispute between the likes of Fodor and Chomsky on the one hand, and Whorf and Sapir on the other. History, in this case, appears to be repeating itself. Panaccio's *Universals* shows scholastic metaphysics to be both as old as the hills and as fresh as the grass. Lagerlund's *Material Substance* is particularly useful for contemporary metaphysicians grappling with the age-old problem of accounting for the unity of substance through accidental change. He discusses four different scholastic treatments of the problem, including mereological and atomistic accounts, versions of which are still popular today. King's *Body and Soul* is particularly useful in setting the record straight on scholastic thinking about mind-body relations, and places Descartes' Substance Dualism in an intriguing light. As King shows, the philosophical consensus in the 14<sup>th</sup> century came out in favour of what would today be called a form of supervenience. He quotes Buridan: "... our natural reason would dictate that the human intellect is drawn forth out of power belonging to matter, and that it is generable and corruptible" (p. 514). King concludes that philosophical materialism is a continuation of scholastic naturalism that was "displaced by the less sophisticated Cartesian dualism that ushered in modern philosophy" (p. 520). Pink's *Freedom of the Will* is particularly useful on Hobbes' transformation of the free will debate from a dispute regarding accounts of the metaphysical power to opposites to the question regarding the compatibility or otherwise of freedom with efficient causation.

Not all the contributions aim to show the relevance of medieval thought. Oppy's *Arguments for the Existence of God* is a case in point. Oppy's key claim is that "We cannot learn how to prove the existence of God from medieval arguments for the existence of God" (p. 702). Whatever one might make of this claim, Oppy's argument for it is curious. Oppy's case is based primarily on the view that medieval arguments are not so much as 'cogent' because they do not establish the falsity of modern forms of "naturalism". By "naturalism" Oppy means the view that "causal reality is exhausted by natural reality" (p. 701). Essentially Oppy's claim is that the medieval arguments presuppose a metaphysical background not commonly shared by post-Quinean analytical philosophers. This is undoubtedly true; but unless one simply assumes that the metaphysical commitments of naturalism are obviously more warranted than Aristotelian commitments, nothing follows. And given that naturalism is itself under scrutiny these days amongst metaphysicians, it is curious that Oppy writes off the medieval arguments so soon.

As I said, there is much of value in this collection that cannot be highlighted here. Suffice it to say that it is clear to this reviewer that Marenbon has succeeded in making the case that mainstream philosophers would benefit from a greater familiarity with medieval thought. Similarly, historians of the period would find a larger audience if they consistently made the effort to draw connections to contemporary debates. But medieval specialists should not be too complaisant or self-congratulatory. Those with ears to hear have known for some time now that contemporary analytic philosophers have much to gain by close study of medieval thinkers. The challenge now

is to secure an audience for medieval philosophy when there is little or no professional incentive to undergo the considerable linguistic, historical and philosophical work required to familiarize oneself with the field. As long as medieval specialists fail to hold the levers of academic power, and as long as medieval philosophy remains on the sidelines, it will be difficult indeed to secure the mainstream audience medieval philosophy and this *Handbook* deserves.

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