

Robert Pasnau

Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

720 pages

\$155.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9780199567911)

‘One of the best ways to appreciate the Aristotelian approach to metaphysics is to consider why it was abandoned, and what came of that’ (12), says Robert Pasnau in the introduction of his book of nearly 800 pages, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671*. In 1274, Bonaventura and Aquinas died. In 1671, Locke finished the first draft of the *Essay*. In between these two dates, Scholastics discussed the metaphysics of substance inherited from Aristotle, especially the notions of form and matter. But finally, this type of metaphysics collapsed, almost totally. According Pasnau, ‘the most distinct features of the period – especially in contrast with the corpuscularism of the seventeenth century – is its commitment to metaphysical arguments that go beyond the strictly empirical evidence’ (25). Scholastic philosophy disappeared when the value of this commitment came to be questioned and frequently rejected. Already in Molière's plays, during the reign of the the Sun King Louis XIV, Scholasticism was fit only for mockery. A beautiful mind does not argue using syllogisms and does not cite authorities.

This should have betokened the end, not only of metaphysics but even the end of philosophy, Pasnau suggests: ‘the end of any flourishing public inquiry into abstract questions about nature, values and the like, approached largely in terms of *a priori* conceptual connections, developed in terms of carefully articulated theses, and supported by arguments in light of potential objections’ (93). The early seventeenth century was a particularly difficult time for the survival of philosophy thus understood, because Scholasticism had been rejected by Renaissance humanism. Pasnau claims that ‘Montaigne, in his free-wheeling way, does from time to time cross onto recognizably philosophical ground, but his way of proceeding is utterly unphilosophical, free of argumentation and conceptual analysis’ (93). At that moment, *belles lettres*, on one side, and mechanistic science, on the other, might well have totally replaced philosophy. Who saved it? According to Pasnau, it was Descartes, because the *Meditations métaphysiques*, Pasnau thinks, were, despite the trend, still continuous with the ancient and medieval tradition (and this was also the opinion of Étienne Gilson and is now shared by many commentators). By comparison, Hobbes was much more radically hostile to what had for centuries represented philosophical thought and was ready to leave it by the wayside.

What is it that is specific to Scholasticism and that the Renaissance claimed to eliminate? *Metaphysical themes*, Pasnau maintains, and so the title of the book is perfectly justified. But which themes? The list of chapters answers this question: matter, substance, accidents, extension, quality, unity and identity. We can add some crucial terms: essence, causality, inherence, categories, modes, mind, location, *entia successiva*, power, disposition, substantial form, monism, nominalism, dualism, parts and wholes, time, and – surely the most important of all – God. Finally, Scholasticism appears as a gigantic effort to understand the relationships of all these terms to one another. But it is especially the last term, God, that is often used to introduce the relationship to be examined. For example, concerning the notion of successive entity, what counts is ultimately the difference between God, absolutely permanent and eternal (‘the all-at-once and full possession of unending life’, as Boethius says) and things impermanent and incomplete.

Pasnau's book is fortunately not a series of monographs on selected authors, of which we already have several examples. In this sense, it is not an encyclopedia but a true book of metaphysics, examining problems and solutions of different philosophers of this period, philosophers who were careful to explain and compare all the possibilities, often in great detail. The narration in the book matches the dynamic of issues and arguments. Curiously, perhaps, it is nonetheless fascinating to read and not at all boring, like a list of claims or a litany of philosophers. It is even quite possible to read this very big book continuously through, from beginning to end, if you have sufficient time and leisure. But the chapters have sufficient independence to be read individually, according to one's particular interests.

In a book of this kind, the quality of the indexes is crucial. An index of names may be long in a comprehensive historical work, but it is not complicated to construct; it is the *index rerum* that counts. The *index rerum* proposed by Pasnau is particularly well done: it contains useful divisions for finding what you seek without being too finely divided, which would make it useless. A table of authors, both alphabetical and chronological, shows that the book covers philosophers from William of Auvergne (born at the very end of the twelfth century) to Leibniz and Bayle. The bibliography distinguishes between primary and secondary sources, and it is, in itself, a working tool. The book enables one to find out how a particular issue – whether the question of the nature of the qualities, the explanatory force of the nominal powers, or the significance of Descartes' everlasting piece of wax – was conceived and examined by philosophers of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.

One may wonder what has made it possible for such a philosophical history of Scholasticism, with such a mastery of its subject, to be written today. Why has no historian done such a work before, at least not in this way: I mean pondering over the issues involved, rather than over archaeological and purely historical questions? In my view, the reason must be sought in the present state of philosophy. The revival of metaphysics – in analytic philosophy, for a good forty years now, with philosophers such as Peter F. Strawson, David K. Lewis, David Armstrong, Peter van Inwagen – has made it possible to better appreciate traditional Scholastic philosophy. Not that the contemporary 'Scholastic' philosophers are particularly interested in Scholasticism. But they have certainly revived our sense of Scholastic issues, presumably because they have not been impressed by the forms of historicism and anti-realism dominant in Continental philosophy. Pasnau is obviously highly conversant with the debates in analytic metaphysics today, and this allows him to address medieval metaphysical questions in an especially interesting way. The risk is that of anachronism. But Pasnau is very attentive to what remains characteristic and distinctive in Scholastic thought, however aware he may be of contemporary debates about nominalism, modal realism or quadridimensionalism. What also makes such a book possible is the rejection of what may be called 'textualism', very common in Continental philosophy. Textualism approaches the history of philosophy mainly from the perspective of hermeneutics, focusing upon the supposed 'hidden meaning' of texts rather than upon the issues that the texts clearly expose and upon their explicit conceptual and argumentative contents. Obviously Pasnau thinks the problems discussed by philosophers of the great Scholastic period were the same as ours today, although we must be careful in understanding how they have been posed and examined by these philosophers. There is something like a *philosophia perennis*, although the collapse of Scholastic philosophy was for this *philosophia perennis* a particularly dangerous episode.

One of the attractions of Scholasticism is that it is at all not doctrinal, which is completely contrary to the false image that is still sometimes presented of medieval thought (though fortunately now tending to disappear). We cannot say that Scholastic philosophy 'said' this or

that. Such a claim would make no sense. Scholastic philosophy always turns around a set of opposed theses: it is systematic *disputatio*. Rarely in the history of thought have philosophical theses been as diverse and as original as in Scholasticism: the contrast with our own time is particularly striking. This statement may seem both surprising and doubtful. After all, Pasnau's book covers four centuries that include the period of the Inquisition. An interesting chapter (ch. 20) entitled 'Heresy and Novelty' is devoted to this question. In it, Pasnau mounts a formidable critique of the standard account of Scholasticism, defended by Étienne Gilson and others, according to which 'Aquinas represents the ideal culmination of Scholastic thought, while Ockham and other later figures are seen as merely skeptical; corrosive forces, dragging down the achievements of the thirteenth century' (429). But, Pasnau adds, 'so much of Aquinas' greatness lies in the movement that he, more than anyone else, began' (430). However, the story told by Pasnau himself, describing a kind of intellectual terror imposed by the Roman Church on thinkers throughout the period he studies, seems hardly more credible than the image rejected by Pasnau of a scholasticism that was essentially completed in the thirteenth century. The ecclesiastical 'terrorism' described by Pasnau is not so different from what happens in any period, when certain ideas and commitments are considered so fundamental that critical discussion of them is considered dangerous; militant orthodoxy is not specially characteristic of the Scholastic period. We are rightly shocked that heresy could be punished with death, but it is likely that the convictions that led to such ends seem today to lack the crucial importance that they were considered to have at the time. It may seem surprising that philosophical thinkers were prohibited from asserting that the rational soul is not the form and actuality of the body. But would it be possible for the one who today claims that the rational soul *is* the form of the body to have a scientific career and to publish in leading journals of cognitive science? I suppose not, although I am not at all sure that such a claim about the rational soul and the body is nonsense; indeed, I even think that it is a plausible claim. And I am not shocked (as Pasnau *seems* to be, although perhaps he is not) to find Diego Ledesma, prefect of studies at the Jesuits' Roman College in 1562, saying that 'new opinions, especially in weighty matters, should not be introduced without the express advice and express license of superiors' (quoted by Pasnau, p. 435); for today we have what is called 'peer review', proclaimed as indispensable for the preservation of science! However, Pasnau is certainly right when he says – speaking about the four centuries examined in the book – that 'there is also hardly any evidence that scholars wanted the sort of wide-open intellectual freedom we value so much today' (437).

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