

Peter Adamson
Medieval Philosophy.
A history of philosophy without any gaps
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It is daunting even to consider writing a handbook of medieval philosophy. The Middle Ages is in fact a remarkably long and complex period, conventionally covering over ten centuries, during which a countless number of authors follow one another. Medieval authors are usually called upon for encyclopaedic knowledge: from logic to theology, from physics to metaphysics, from ethics to politics. They reflect upon and teach many topics, in ordinary lessons at the schools (first in the monasteries, then in the schools of the city, of the convents and finally of the universities) as well as during scholastic disputations, or on other occasions as well, both public and private. We are accustomed to privilege some themes when studying a certain author, school or tradition, in part because some philosophical topics rather than others appear to be discussed in a certain period or geographical area, in a given author, school or tradition. But in part, this selection depends on the fact that over time the positions of the medievals become more and more stereotyped: Thomists say one thing, Scotists something else, and so on. In part, too, our choice depends on the fact that the historiography has proceeded in certain directions and focused, with respect to a given author, school or tradition, on some themes to the detriment of others. Why, for example, in a handbook of medieval philosophy, such as Adamson's, should one find a chapter on Ockham's account of mental language (chapter 59)?

Historically speaking, there might be no reason to linger specifically on this issue. Ockham's discussion of mental language is not completely new, but rather continues the discussions of other authors. Ockham criticizes his forerunners and those who come after will reply to him (as Adamson notes in chapter 60). There is continuity between authors and continuity is precisely what justifies the project of writing "a history of medieval philosophy without any gaps", as claims the title of the series to which this volume belongs. But the lines of this continuity are often concealed and bringing them to light depends on the amount of information we have at hand and consequently on our historio-

graphical choices. Moreover, one should consider not just historical continuity, but also the historical context in which authors work and develop doctrines.

Returning to the example of mental language, medieval authors deal with this topic when dealing with the explanation of the mechanisms of intellectual knowledge. Mental language is the outcome of debates on the simultaneity and composition of mental acts, debates that flourished at the beginning of the fourteenth century at the Universities of Paris and Oxford. But the scholarly literature from the end of 1970's onward has contained an intense discussion especially on Ockham's view of mental language, largely inspired by contemporary interests in the philosophical significance and theoretical implications of Ockham's doctrines. The analyses of the consistency of Ockham's position and on his possible evolution have lasted for many years, drawing attention to significant points and details of Ockham's explanation of human knowledge. To devote a chapter to Ockham's 'theory' of mental language means to investigate the Franciscan author in the light of such historiographical achievements. But one has to consider that our understanding of what was significant for a given author in a given period does not necessarily coincide with our understanding of what we today assess as significant for that author and period. There are many philosophical and theological topics of Ockham that have not received the same attention in literature, and for this reason, they are not normally mentioned in a handbook of medieval philosophy. Nonetheless, they were discussed in the Middle Ages, so that the historians of medieval philosophy are compelled to select, and in making a selection, historians are often influenced by the extant historiographical controversies. Admitting gaps or not gaps in the history is thus a matter of choice to a certain degree: it depends on our decision about which authors (major and minor) and which topics to treat. The difficulty of bringing together in a single volume all the threads (and all the possible areas) of the history of philosophy in the Middle Ages explains why one could find writing a handbook of medieval philosophy a discourage prospect.

Peter Adamson is fully aware of these difficulties and very aptly bypasses them by proposing a new way of handling the complexity of the Middle Ages. As the title of the series to which Adamson's volume belongs reveals, the purposes of this series is to provide the most unified and continuous possible reconstruction of the history of philosophy. This book strikes the reader precisely with its non-traditional arrangement, weaving together the strands of the history in an intriguingly original way. Formally, the book is a companion that aims at introducing students and unfamiliar readers to the world of the Latin philosophy in the Middle Ages. But in fact it mostly appears as a personal reflection by Adamson on the many issues and authors of the Middle Ages,

a sort of 'telling a story' concerning the philosophy in the Middle Ages, so to say. Such a story displays some features: it attempts to gather together more or less current historiographical discussions, recent discoveries of new authors, texts and other materials, and at the same time to propose a general and philosophically oriented understanding of the different topics under investigation. In a way, it aims at offering a philosophical translation of medieval themes and discussions in terms more familiar to today's readers.

Adamson achieves this goal in two moves: first, he reduces the chronological range of investigation (only from the ninth to the fourteenth century, the philosophically more vivid part of the Middle Ages), and second, he develops not only traditional but also untraditional lines connecting authors. Thus, if on the one hand, the volume includes topics traditionally related to medieval philosophy and theology (such as the proofs for demonstrating God's existence, the relationship between philosophy and theology, or the problem of universals, only to mention some of them), on the other hand, it also follows less trodden paths, such as Catherine of Siena and medieval spirituality (chapter 74), or even unexpected topics, as sexuality and misogyny in the Middle Ages (chapter 73).

Adamson's history of medieval philosophy has, among its many merits, two great ones. First, is very clearly written and philosophically acute. Returning to Ockham's mental language, the chapter on the topic gives many starting points for reflecting on the nature of mental language that arise from Ockham's texts, points that put Ockham in a fruitful dialogue with modern and contemporary philosophers.

A second merit is that it proposes an updated interpretation of medieval philosophy, obtained by taking into account the most dominant trends present in literature. This makes Peter Adamson's volume a fine piece of work and a recommended volume. The history of medieval philosophy is investigated in its depth and full development, no significant gap can be found indeed in the proposed reconstruction. The plan of the work includes 78 short chapters. More than one chapter is reserved for each of the major (or most influential) authors: four for John Duns Scotus, three each for Aquinas and Ockham, two each for Eriugena, Anselm and Albert the Great, just for some cases. One single chapter is reserved for specific topics that have characterized segments, parts or authors of medieval philosophy as well as historiographical discussions (for example, the thirteenth-century debate on the just war: chapter 40; or the historiographical question of the so-called 'Latin Averroism': chapter 42) or even for less studied thinkers and themes (for example, Marguerite Porete: chapter 53; or the Romance of the Rose: chapter 45). All that makes the volume extremely reach and varied, a volume that can be approached – as

Adamson himself helpfully underscores in his preface – from different perspectives and that proposes to meet the largest number of interests of readers. It gives a close presentation of all the areas of medieval thought, and moves well beyond the classic faith/reason or philosophy/theology divides. The non-technical and non-scholastic way in which it is written, moreover, makes it accessible even to a non-specialist audience and comprehensible by unfamiliar readers of the Middle Ages.

The meritorious features of a well-written and accurately organized volume also reveal some limits to the enterprise of writing a “history of medieval philosophy without any gaps”. Most significant authors and themes are discussed with great attention and the connections towards past and future are always clearly underlined. This is an undeniable merit of the volume. But on the other hand, one also has to say that authors are in most case introduced without any substantial presentation of their figures, of their works and the literary genera to which they belong, and of their sources (the sole exception seems to be Anselm, to whose life and works is reserved a separate chapter: chapter 7).

What may be said for the presentation of the works of the medieval authors also holds for the references to such works. Take for instance chapter 16 on Gilbert of Poitiers and individuation. Gilbert is important not only for this theory, but his position on individuation has particularly attracted the attention of scholars. Now, Gilbert’s position is illustrated in a general way, within an abstract presentation of the philosophical significance and implications of the problem of individuation. No text of Gilbert is referred to in the text, nor in the notes, but only studies of secondary literature. Likewise, if we return for the last time to the chapter on Ockham’s mental language, a reader can realize that it contains only a few references to Ockham’s works, but no text, neither in the body of the chapter nor in the notes at the end, is explicitly quoted to make clearer and justified what has been saying. Regardless of the reasons that led Adamson to arrange the volumes of the series in this way, the substantial lack of biographical contextualization of authors as well as of the references to texts might render the volume scarcely attractive or useful for students.

If one assessed the volume according to traditional standards, these limits might be acknowledged. But Adamson’s volume may be considered as an important didactic tool precisely because it means to offer a fresh way of approaching the study of medieval philosophy. Adamson proposes to the reader deep and illuminating reflections on medieval philosophy, sharpening the book as a sort of trampoline for further readings (suggested at the end of the final notes to chapters) and for interacting with the wide range materials stored in the website www.historyofphilosophy.net (edited by Adamson him-

self). As Adamson writes, the volume especially aims at inspiring the readers and showing them that “medieval philosophers had some extraordinarily interesting ideas” (p. xiii), so that the readers are encouraged to put the medievals in close dialogue with modern and contemporary philosophers.

The shortcomings we underscored above are in a way present to Adamson. As he provocatively says in the preface, “I would consider my mission as an author accomplished if it leaves you unsatisfied” (p. xiii). Indeed, while one might profoundly appreciate Adamson’s discussions and his great accuracy in the philosophical analysis of authors and themes, his continuous bringing together elements from different authors or traditions, his ordinary-speech way of presenting, exemplifying and discussing medieval doctrines and insights, one might also find the general arrangement of the book discomfiting. The intentional lack of information about the texts that convey doctrines, the absence of a reconstruction of philosophical and historical contexts, and a certain silence on the sources that are used will leave some unsatisfied. But if so, Adamson has achieved his mission: the book belongs to those that the readers interested in the Middle Ages should know for having an uncommon and stimulating point of view on medieval philosophy.

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