



Introduction to Medieval Philosophy

Overview

What Is Medieval Philosophy?

- History and Historiography

- Translations

- Medieval philosophical traditions

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- Parmenides's challenge

- Aristotle's answer

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(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



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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) + ???

- Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394)
- Aurelius Augustinus (d. 430)
- Avicbron (Ibn Gabirol) (d. 1070?)
- Al-Ghazali (d. 1111)
- Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274)
- Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1284)
- Henry of Ghent (d. 1293)
- John Duns Scotus (d. 1308)
- Peter Auriol (d. 1322)
- Nicholas of Autrecourt (d. 1369)



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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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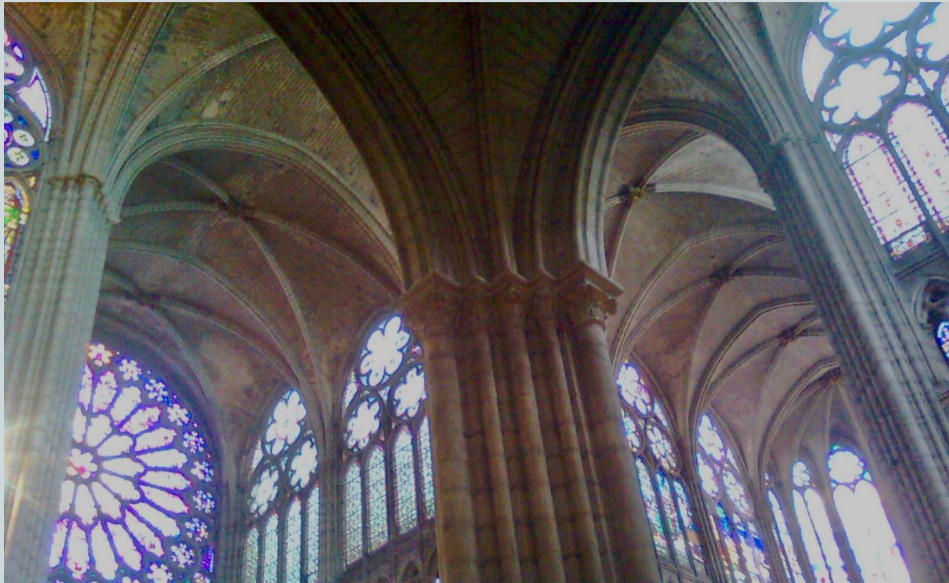
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Parmenides's Challenge (Fragment B8)

What is...

... is ungenerated and imperishable, single kind, unshaken, complete, exists all together (perfect).

In other words, no change!

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Parmenides's Challenge (Fragment B8)

Parmenides's argument against change:

P_1 Non-being cannot exist.

P_2 Generation is only possible if there is non-being.

C_1 Thus, generation is not possible. [MT: P_1, P_2]

P_4 Change is only possible if generation is possible.

\therefore Therefore, change is impossible. [MT, C_1, P_4]

- The argument is valid.
- Justification for the premises:
 - P_1 : Self-evident; if something exists, it is not a non-being.
 - P_2 : Generation = coming to be *from non-being*.
 - P_4 : Change is a kind of generation.

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Parmenides is obviously wrong. But why? And what must the metaphysical structure of the world be like, in order to account for change?

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Physics I.7, 190a7–16

“Of what we call the simple coming-to-be things, one remains when it comes to be, and the other does not. . . . In all cases of coming to be. . . there must always be something underlying which is the coming-to-be thing, and this, even if it is one in number, is not one in form.”

Physics I.7, 190b10–13

“[I]t is clear that that which comes to be is always composite, and there is one thing which comes to be, and another which comes to be this, and the latter is twofold: either the underlying thing, or the thing which is opposed. By that which is opposed, I mean the ignorant of music, by that which underlies, the man; and shapelessness, formlessness, disarray are opposed, and the bronze, the stone, the gold underlie.”

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Physics I.7, 191a8–13

“As for the underlying nature, it must be grasped by analogy. As bronze stands to a statue, or wood to a bed, or the formless before it acquires a form to anything else which has a definite form, so this stands to a reality, to a this thing here, to what is.”

Physics I.8, 191a23–191b7

“[T]his is the only way of resolving the difficulty felt by thinkers of earlier times. . . . So clearly to say that something comes to be out of what is not is to say that it does so out of what is not *as something which is not.*”

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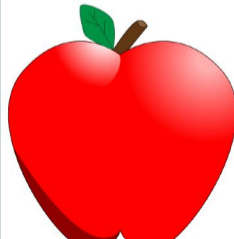
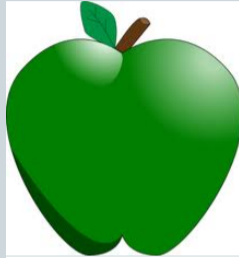
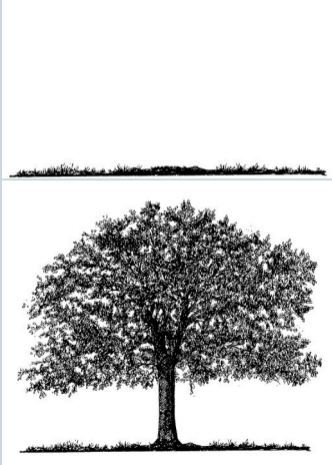
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Matter and Form: 2 Kinds of Change

① We need to distinguish between **generation** and **qualitative change**.



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Thus, according to Aristotle, change *is* possible, but both kinds involve complexity.

- 1 **Qualitative change:** We need an underlying object (e.g., an apple), which can take on various properties while remaining the same.
 - Aristotle calls these properties **accidental forms**.
 - An accidental form is, thus, a property gained or lost through qualitative change.
 - E.g.: greenness, redness, roundness, being black-haired, etc.
 - When something loses an accidental form, it still remains the same object (or person).

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Matter and Form

Thus, according to Aristotle, change *is* possible, but both kinds involve complexity.

- ② **Substantial change:** We also need something underlying, and something to make the change happen.
- The underlying thing is **matter** (ὕλη)
 - In generation, matter takes on a new **substantial form** (μόρφη)
 - E.g.: bronze taking on the form of a statue:



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Medieval Philosophy, 6AANB023

16th January, 2026

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- Can this be made consistent with the theological framework (God created the world)? – various accounts of creation in Christianity, Jewish, and Arabic thought
- Does Aristotle's account help to solve the problem at all? What about the generation of the substantial form itself?
- What more can we say about matter and form? Is matter composed of atoms? Are there elements, and if so, how do they mix? Can we say anything about matter – does it have any positive characteristics?

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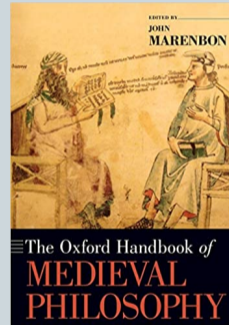
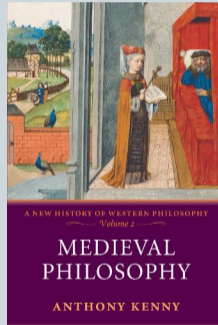
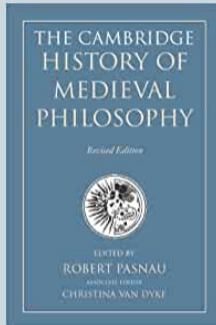
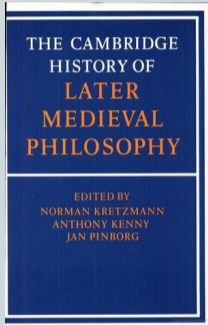
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Further Sources



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