**Scholasticism, The Medieval Synthesis**

Encountering Aristotle in the middle-ages

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**Part I – Scholastic Philosophy**

**Scholastic:** “from Middle French scholastique, from Latin scholasticus "learned," from Greek skholastikos "studious, learned"" ¹

Came to be associated with the ‘teachers’ and churchmen in European Universities whose work was generally rooted in Aristotle and the Church Fathers.

**A. Re-discovering Aristotle & Co – c. 12th Century**

- The Toledo school: translating Arabic & Hebrew philosophy and science as well as Arabic & Hebrew translations of Aristotle and commentaries on Aristotle (notably works of Ibn Rushd and Maimonides)
- From Toledo, through Provence, to...
- Palermo, Sicily – 13th Century – Under the rule of Roger of Sicily (Norman ruler)
- William of Moerbeke (Dutch cleric): greatest translator of the 13th century, and (possibly) ‘colleague’ of Thomas Aquinas.

**B. Greek Philosophy in the Christian monotheistic world: Boethius to scholasticism**

- **Boethius** (c. 475 – c. 526) philosopher, poet, politician – best known for his work *Consolation of Philosophy*, written as a dialogue between Boethius and ‘Lady Philosophy’, addressing issues ranging from the nature and essence of God, to evil, and ethics; translated Aristotle’s works on logic into Latin, and wrote commentaries on said works.
- **John Scotus Eriugena** (c. 815 – c. 877) Irish philosopher of the early monastic period; translated into Latin the works of pseudo-Dionysius, developed a Christian Neoplatonic world view.
- **Anselm** (c. 1033 – 1109) Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109; best known for his “ontological argument” for the existence of God in chapter two of the *Proslogion* (translated into English: *Discourse on the Existence of God*); referred to by many as one of the founders of scholasticism.
- **Abelard** (1079 – 1142) philosopher, theologian, poet, and musician; reportedly the first to use the term ‘theology’ in its modern sense; remembered as a tragic figure of romance due to his ‘infamous’ love affair with Heloise; wrote on metaphysics, logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, ethics, and theology.
- **Robert Grosseteste** (c. 1175 – 1253) Bishop of Lincoln, England from 1235 to 1253; philosopher and theologian; commentator and translator of Aristotle and Greek patristic thinkers; influenced by Augustine, and drew on the works of Aristotle, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd.

[Other important names include: Peter Lombard (c. 1096 – 1164); Albertus Magnus (1196/1203 – 1289); Roger Bacon (1214 – 1294); Bonaventure (1221 – 1274) John Duns Scotus (c. 1266 – 1308); William of Ockham (c. 1288 – c. 1348)]

**C. Some problematic issues en-countered:**

- How does one reconcile the invariable causal relations in Nature with God’s miracles?
- If the soul is part of the human ‘substance’, how could one speak of the soul as being immortal as such?
- And if, according to Aristotle’s ‘virtue ethics’, the good life is be found and achieved in the life here-and-now, how is one to understand Heaven then?

¹ Sources: Online Etymology Dictionary (www.etymonline.com)
PART II – THREE ‘SYNTHESIZERS’: IBN RUSHD, MAIMONIDES, AND AQUINAS

A. Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198)
   a. Brief biographical sketch
   b. An illustration from the first section of *The Decisive Treatise*
      ▶ Standpoint of the Law (shari’ah) in relation to philosophy.
      ▶ Summary of the argument:
         1. The Law obliges us to study beings and reflect on them.
         2. Reflection is only possible through intellectual reasoning, the highest of which is demonstration.
         3. This means one has to study the rules and principles of reasoning, various types of arguments, etc...
         4. This means that one has to study the works of those before us who have done work in these matters...
         5. Having gained the skill, one has to now study beings and reflect upon them (back to 1).
         6. This means one has to study what those before us have done in this field (the study of beings) just like with any other field..

As such: the Law obliges us to study philosophy.

B. Maimonides (1135 – 1204)
   a. Brief biographical sketch
   b. An illustration from Chapter LII (52) of *The Guide for the Perplexed*
      ▶ Rejection of essential attributes in reference to God.
      ▶ “Every description of an object by an affirmative attribute, which includes the assertion that an object is of a certain kind, must be made in one of the following five ways”:
         ▶ First: Description by definition.
         ▶ Second: Description by part of the definition.
         ▶ Third: Description relating to quality.
         Four kinds of qualities:
         ▶ Intellectual or moral qualities, or by dispositions belonging to...
         ▶ Physical qualities.
         ▶ Passive qualities or emotions.
         ▶ Quality resulting from quantity.
         ▶ Fourth: Description by the things or person’s relation to another thing.
         ▶ Fifth manner to describe a thing is by its action, i.e. actions performed by it.

Consequently, Maimonides will move to argue that any knowledge of God by us can only be, and rightly be, knowledge of the negative attributes of God, i.e. knowledge of what God is not.

C. Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274)
   a. Brief biographical sketch
   b. An illustration from *Summa Theologica*: Question II: The Existence of God
      ▶ Aquinas’ method: he sets down the question he wishes to address, then he presents the ‘antithesis’ to his position (these are the objections he presents), he then moves to state his thesis and the best arguments in support of it (usually beginning with *On the contrary and I answer that* in the translation we’re using), and concludes with the refutations (replies) to the objections previously put forth.
      ▶ First Article’s question: “Whether the Existence of God is self-evident?”
      ▶ Second Article’s question: “Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?”
         “…the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.”
      ▶ Third Article’s question: “Whether God exists?”

“In reliving the Aristotelian Revolution, we understand that we are not just the children of Copernicus and Galileo, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson, but Aristotle’s children: the heirs of a medieval tradition that seems more intriguing and inspiring as the shortcomings of modernity become clearer. Of course, most of us would not return to the Middle Ages if we could. Few people today would embrace the assumptions and conclusions of the medieval scholastics. But the Aristotelian’s quest for meaning is also ours, and we have much to learn from their vision of a science infused by ethics and a religion unafraid of reason. In this little known but formative chapter of our history, we may detect hints of a more humane and integrated global future.”

CENTRAL QUOTATIONS FROM THE AUTHORS UNDER DISCUSSION:

IBN RUSHD

If the activity of philosophy is nothing more than study of existing beings and reflection upon them as indications of the Artisan… and if the Law has encouraged and urged reflection on beings, then it is clear that what this name signifies is either obligatory or recommended by law.

Reflection is nothing more than inference and drawing out the unknown from the known, and since this is reasoning or at any rate done by reasoning, therefore we are under an obligation to carry our study of beings by intellectual reasoning.

MAIMONIDES

There cannot be any belief in the unity of God except by admitting that He is one simple substance, without any composition or plurality of elements.

Hence it follows that no attribute coming under the head of quality in its widest sense, can be predicated of God. Consequently, these three classes of attributes, describing the essence of a thing, or part of the essence, or a quality of it, are clearly inadmissible in reference to God.

In short, it is necessary to demonstrate by proof that nothing can be predicated of God that implies any of the following four things: corporeality, emotion or change, nonexistence… In this respect our knowledge of God is aided by the study of Natural Science. For he who is ignorant of the latter cannot understand the defect implied in emotions, the difference between potentiality and reality, the non-existence implied in all potentiality… He who knows these things, but without their proofs, does not know the details which logically result from these general propositions: and therefore he cannot prove that God exists, or that the [four] things mentioned above are inadmissible in reference to God.

AQUINAS

But the opposite of the proposition God is can be mentally admitted: The fool said in his heart, There is no God (Ps. III.1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

When an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause. And from every effect the existence of its proper cause can be demonstrated, so long as its effects are better known to us.