



RICHARD CROSS

THE  
MEDIEVAL  
CHRISTIAN  
PHILOSOPHERS  
AN INTRODUCTION

I.B. TAURIS



**Richard Cross** is John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. He has published widely on the history of philosophical theology, and his books include *Duns Scotus* (1999), *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation* (2002) and *Duns Scotus on God* (2005).

Richard Cross has written a clear and engaging guide to the emergence of medieval philosophy in the Latin Christian West. Beginning with the consolidation of the inheritance of antiquity (roughly 1050–1200), Cross traces the development of philosophical thought in its successive phases: the assimilation of new translations of Aristotle and his commentators (1200–77); the refinement of the neo-Aristotelian synthesis (1277–1300); and its re-evaluation (1300–50). Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham are key players, of course, but they are contextualized in their social and intellectual milieu, so that the contributions of Grosseteste, Bacon, Albert, Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines, Peter Auriol, and many others are recognized as well. With insight and grace, Cross discusses the philosophical topics that motivated these thinkers: the problem of universals, the nature of scientific knowledge, the relation of the soul to the body, the mechanisms of human cognition, divine power and foreknowledge, and much else besides. This masterly presentation is lucid and accessible, providing beginners and specialists alike with a thorough account of the period, enlivened by Cross's erudition and wit.

*Peter King, Professor of Philosophy and of  
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Richard Cross's book provides a lucid introduction to the accepted great figures of medieval philosophy – Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, Scotus and Ockham – beautifully nuanced treatments of a number of more minor figures and, despite the deliberately old-fashioned choice of material, an important new perspective on it. Cross's presentation is outstanding because, although most of the men he considers were theologians, he treats them, rightly, as doing philosophy of the highest order. Without technical jargon and always in a way fully comprehensible to a beginner, Cross engages philosophically with these thinkers' positions and arguments, so that the reader comes to understand not just what they thought, but the reasons for which they thought it. His big innovation – foreshadowed in much recent specialized work, but never stated so clearly as here – is to see the half-century or so immediately *after* the lifetime of Aquinas as the great period of discovery and achievement in medieval philosophy, with Duns Scotus the pre-eminent philosopher, and Ockham as providing a radical simplification, which however left him and his followers unable to answer fundamental metaphysical questions. I would strongly recommend this book to any student looking for a sober, clear, elegant and stimulating introduction to the recognized great medieval philosopher-theologians.

*John Marenbon, senior research fellow,  
Trinity College, Cambridge*

Richard Cross's highly intelligent treatment slides easily between historical context and doctrinal exposition, both to orient students to a challenging period and to acquaint contemporary Christian philosophers with the formidable range and creativity of their medieval predecessors. Besides individual chapters on his 'top four' – Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham – Cross includes substantial discussions of authors rather less studied: Gilbert of Poitiers, Peter John Olivi, Giles of Rome, Hervaeus Natalis and Peter Auriol, among others, the better to provoke more work on such important medieval thinkers.

*Marilyn McCord Adams, Distinguished Visiting Professor  
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*For Freddie*





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# *Preface*

This book aims to cover a huge amount of material, and it attempts to do so in a manageable kind of way. So I have had to make some hard choices. I start at 1050 – reasonably thought of as the beginning of the scholastic period, as I outline in the Introduction. But for reasons that I explain in my final chapter, I have basically taken 1350 as my cut-off date. There is a great deal that could be said about the later period; but, apart from a brief discussion of Wyclif, it will not be said here. Equally, I have treated merely of Western Christian philosophy, against the prevailing trend of seeing medieval philosophy not merely as an international affair but as an intercontinental one. To this, I say merely that I do not want to write on things that I do not know enough about. I know well enough how the Latin translations of Arabic writers were received by the Latin speakers of the West, for example; but I do not know Arabic, beyond the little it has in common with Syriac, and cannot comment on the relation between the translations and the original texts; or, indeed, on the philosophy of the thinkers themselves. The translations are another matter: philosophical texts in their own right, authored partly by their Arabic originators, but hijacked and transformed, consciously or not, skilfully or recklessly, by their translators. And it is these texts that were of relevance in the West, the topic of my study here.

In some ways, then, I have ended up writing a rather more old-fashioned book than I had anticipated – and not just in terms of my timescale. It is not without reason, for example, that Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham are often highlighted as the greatest of the medieval philosophers; and I think it makes for more philosophically interesting reading (and writing) to structure the text around these thinkers. But, of course, focusing on ‘big’ thinkers – those thinkers judged great with the benefit of hindsight, judged by the light of history – is anachronistic, for all its philosophical wealth; and it is in this way that my text has come out rather traditional, somehow falling into the inheritance of twentieth-century historiographies

that I have until now rather attempted to avoid. But I have tried to impose or discern some kind of overarching narrative that is rather different, I think, from any that has been suggested before.

And the choice of second-league figures, so to speak, has not been easy. In the end, I thought it most helpful to go with those who have, I think, been central to many twentieth-century histories, rather than introduce large collections of lesser-known figures. There are too many very good thinkers who fundamentally found themselves agreeing with some kind of party line; I have tried to focus on thinkers who had sparks of innovative originality. So, for example, among the Franciscans of the late thirteenth century, Roger Marston, Richard of Middleton, Gonsalvus of Spain, and the urbane and civilized Matthew of Aquasparta, do not appear. And of the Dominicans, I do not discuss solid and reliable figures such as John of Naples. I have not discussed Meister Eckhart (perhaps I should have done), since he ultimately seems something of an outlier for academic philosophy. At any rate, perhaps secular theologians – those that do not belong to religious orders – suffer most of all from this approach. But the best of them are included here (e.g. Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines); some of the second-league figures are really rather dull, though I discuss William of Auvergne in some detail since he was notable for his assimilation of some of the novel philosophical texts of the early thirteenth century.

In terms of the structure of the work, it will become immediately apparent that, while the main treatments of particular philosophers are in the sections devoted to them, I have not used this structure like a straitjacket. While I have tried to give individual philosophers sustained attention in this way, I have also tried to give some sense of the *dialectic*: and this means allowing discussion of one thinker to bleed into discussion of another. So for a full sense of what I have to say about an individual thinker, it is necessary to use the index.

Discussions with friends and colleagues have helped me sort out particular points: thanks to Marilyn Adams, Eileen Botting, Eric Hagedorn, Isabelle Moulin, John O'Callaghan, Stephen Dumont, and Cecilia Trifogli, all of whom helped me, even if sometimes they did so without realizing it. Faults, of course, are mine and mine alone. Except where noted, translations are my own too. When I cite existing translations, I include page references to the translations but not to the Latin texts; when I provide my own translations, I include page references to the Latin texts.

# *Introduction*

## Institutions and Sources

Western Europe in 1050 was something of an intellectual backwater. Compared to the phenomenal achievements of philosophers in India, China, and (more relevantly) the Islamic world, thinkers in Western Europe had accomplished very little for perhaps five or six hundred years. Even moribund Byzantium was intellectually livelier. For reasons that are not altogether straightforward, or even particularly evident, things started changing radically, particularly from around 1100, and the Latin West was able not merely to catch up with the intellectual attainments of these other civilizations, but to surpass them. No one really knows what brought this renaissance about. But we know quite a lot about *how* it was brought about, and this is the topic of my first chapter. The answer is, in some ways, rather dull and predictable: philosophers massively increased the range of sources available to them, and they managed to create institutions that gave them the opportunity to study these sources in a structured way.

### *The sources: twelfth-century (re)discovery, thirteenth-century effects*

Someone living in 1100, interested in developing philosophical ideas, had a number of useful sources to turn to. Foremost in importance from a philosophical point of view are a couple of Aristotelian works, and texts of Aristotelian inspiration: Aristotle's *Categories* and *On Interpretation*; and Porphyry's *Isagoge* or introduction to the categories, all in the translation prepared by Boethius (c. 475/7–525/6). Along with an anonymous early twelfth-century treatise once thought to be by Gilbert of Poitiers (1085/90–1154), the *De sex principiis*, this gives us the so-called '*logica vetus*' ('old logic').

Boethius authored a couple of important logical works of his own (on categorical and hypothetical syllogisms, and on topics) which were likewise available, along with his commentaries on the *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, and the *Isagoge*. In fact, Aristotle, albeit in this highly restricted *corpus*, was the most important philosophical influence throughout this early period. John Marenbon has shown that the earliest significant medieval thought was fundamentally Aristotelian in orientation, with a strong emphasis on logic and language (see Marenbon, 1981). And it is likely that a standard education from antiquity onwards would have equipped students with the rudiments of the *Categories*, along with Porphyry's *Isagoge*, thus giving notions of primary and secondary substance (particular and universal), and the accidental (non-essential) categories or predicates (quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, affection) from the *Categories*; and genus, specific difference, definition/species (constituted of genus and specific difference), *proprium* (necessary but non-defining feature), and accident – the so-called 'predicables', varieties of universals – from Porphyry's *Isagoge*.

So it is unsurprising that, once the cultural and political situation facilitated it, it would be Aristotle whose complete *oeuvre* would hold sway in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. And this is precisely what happened. Boethius had translated too the rest of the logical works of Aristotle (the *Organon*) with the exception of the *Posterior Analytics*, and these texts (*Prior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations*) became widely available from the 1120s. This gives us the '*logica nova*' ('new logic'): *Prior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations*. It is fair to say that the overwhelming philosophical achievements of the twelfth century lie in the area of logic: pre-eminently Peter Abelard (1079–1142) in terms of quality; but more influential was a range of works collectively containing what is known as the *logica modernorum*, themselves largely inspired by the contribution of Abelard (for these treatises, many of which are anonymous, see L. M. de Rijk, 1962–7). Thirteenth-century logic did little to expand the insights contained in these texts, and the works themselves were known to later thirteenth-century writers largely through high-quality summaries produced by certain key thirteenth-century logicians – most notably Peter of Spain (*fl.* 1230s–40s), and also William of Sherwood (1200/5–66/72) and Lambert of Auxerre (*fl.* 1250s). It is not until the fourteenth century that we find further significant developments in logic: in

particular, a grasp of the general principles of propositional logic, spelled out most notably in Walter Burley (1274/5–1344/5), and the development of the so-called *Obligations* literature, focusing on different disputational puzzles or *sophismata*.

Boethius's stated plan was to translate all of the works of Plato and Aristotle, and, through commentaries, to demonstrate that these two thinkers were not in disagreement with each other. (This is not as absurd a project as it perhaps sounds: the standard Neoplatonic approach to the issue was to insist that Plato's work dealt with the world of intelligence and the Forms, and Aristotle's with the material, sub-lunar, world.) In setting out his programme, Boethius hinted at a great body of learning that was not known in the West in 1100: namely, the remaining works of both Plato and Aristotle. The medievals never got any further in the task of locating and translating Plato – this was something that would have to wait until the fifteenth century. There is one exception to this: Calcidius's fourth-century translation of the first half of Plato's cosmological dialogue, the *Timaeus*, a work of vital importance for twelfth-century thought. Interest in this work was almost entirely eclipsed by the focus on Aristotle in the thirteenth century – presumably because of its inconsistency with central features of Aristotelian metaphysics (for example, its commitment to atomism, vigorously rejected by Aristotle as a response to Zeno's paradoxes). But the remaining works of Aristotle revolutionized the medievals' world view from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards, in ways that I will try to describe here and in later chapters. I have already mentioned most of the works of the *Organon*. The remaining work, the *Posterior Analytics*, was translated by James of Venice in the first half of the twelfth century (though, as arguably the densest and least accessible of Aristotle's logical works, it attracted no sustained attention until Robert Grosseteste's commentary in the 1220s). James translated the *Physics*, *De anima*, and *Metaphysics* A–Γ (1120–50). The more-or-less complete *Metaphysics* was translated anonymously sometime later in the twelfth century too; and again, not from Greek but from Arabic, by Michael Scot around 1220–35. Michael's version – the so-called '*nova*' ('new') – proved the most popular by far (contrasting with James's '*vetustissima*' ('very old'), its early thirteenth-century revision (the '*vetus*') and the anonymous twelfth-century '*media*' ('middle')). The *Nicomachean Ethics* was not translated completely until 1246–7, by Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170–1253); a good translation, from

Greek, of the complete *Metaphysics*, and a translation of the *Politics*, were not produced until Aquinas's translator, William of Moerbeke, did so in the 1260s and 1270s.

The rediscovery of the rest of the Aristotelian *corpus* affected all aspects of thirteenth and fourteenth-century philosophy. It was impossible that it should not: doing philosophy and theology while ignoring Aristotle would be the thirteenth-century analogue of someone attempting to do philosophy or theology today while ignoring almost everything that twentieth and twenty-first-century science has discovered. Thinkers did not slavishly follow Aristotle on everything: quite the contrary, they engaged with his arguments and rejected them when they found them wanting. And, of course, being philosophers, they all did so in different ways. Aristotle was a catalyst for them to engage more deeply with each other too. But, as we shall see, they all adopted certain fundamental Aristotelian insights on the nature and structure of material beings.

Aristotle's logic was not the only philosophical source available in 1100. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was not only the most significant of the early Christian theologians, but also a conduit for a great deal of philosophical thought from antiquity. Augustine was clearly acquainted with the rudiments of Aristotelian logic – that much is plain from the crucial central chapters of his *De trinitate*. But he was also perhaps the main route for the transmission of Platonism – to which he was remarkably sympathetic – to the later Middle Ages. For example, Augustine takes from the Platonists the crucial idea that there are universal forms. Plato posited such forms, at least for part of his life, in order to explain how it is that different things of the same kind seem to have features *in common*: two egg yolks are both yellow, and the yellowness of one might be exactly the same as the yellowness of another. So, Plato reasoned, the explanation for this must be that there are abstract properties – yellowness, whiteness, and so on – in which the eggs 'participate'. These Forms exist eternally, changelessly, and necessarily, apart from the temporal, changeable, contingent material world. They explain how it is that material things are the kinds of things that they are (for a typical discussion of the issue in Plato, see *Republic* VII (517–518B)). Obviously, it would be hard (though not impossible) for a Christian theologian to be happy with the thought that there are eternal and necessary items apart from God. But Augustine (following the example of Philo of Alexandria and Plotinus) suggested that



divine thoughts – divine *ideas* – might be able to perform the same function as the Platonic forms. In effect, Augustine simply places the forms in the mind of God:

The ideas are certain original and principal forms of things, that is, reasons, fixed and unchangeable, which are not themselves formed, and, being thus eternal and existing always in the same state, are contained in the divine intelligence. And though they themselves neither come into being nor pass away, nevertheless, everything which can come into being and pass away, and everything which does come into being and pass away, is said to be formed in accord with these ideas. (*De diversis quaestionibus*, q. 46, n. 2 (trans. Mosher, p. 80))

Augustine's divine ideas are ideas of universal kinds, not of particulars, and discussion of the existence and nature of universals constitutes one of the central areas of medieval philosophical debate. A considerable part of what follows will trace some of these debates through the High Middle Ages. As we shall see, most thinkers rejected Platonic forms; and, perhaps surprisingly, few thinkers appeal to the divine ideas to explain kind-membership. The reason for this is that a powerful alternative tradition on the question of universals existed in antiquity: one coming from Aristotle, and initially mediated to the Middle Ages through Boethius. I will come back to all of this in a moment.

Augustine provided many other things of philosophical interest for the intelligent reader. For example, he adopts Plato's fundamentally visual model of thinking: thinking of a universal is something like 'looking' at the form. Since according to Augustine the forms are items in the divine mind, human knowledge is fundamentally a matter of divine illumination. As Augustine understands it, intellectual cognition involves 'judging corporeal things in accordance with incorporeal and eternal reasons (*rationes*)' (*De trinitate* XII, c. 2, 2), something achieved when the 'mind's eye' (*acies mentis*) 'grasps' the forms in the divine mind (*De trinitate* IX, c. 6, 11). Some medievals adopt this wholesale, and attempt to integrate it into Aristotle's philosophy of mind – with the 'agent intellect' from book 3 of *De anima*: a text not known to Augustine.

Talking of the ideas as *reasons* (*rationes*) suggests that Augustine is perhaps integrating his theology into another bit of

ancient philosophy as well, not Platonic but Stoic: the notion of 'seminal reasons' (*logoi spermatikoi* in Greek, or *rationes seminales* in Augustine's Latin) – the organizing principles of the Stoics' material world. Augustine's philosophy of mind mediated a further component of Stoic philosophy to the medievals too: the notion that thought is somehow fundamentally *linguistic*. The Stoics talk of a concept as a kind of internal 'word' (a '*logos endiathetos*', contrasted with a spoken or uttered word – the *logos prophorikos*). Augustine takes up this way of thinking enthusiastically, perhaps because of the identification of the second person of the Trinity as a kind of word, made at the beginning of John's Gospel (see John 1.1). As we shall see, later medieval speculations in the philosophy of mind take their lead from these ideas, and attempt to integrate them – and sometimes reject them – in the light of insights from Aristotle's *De anima*. Basically, Aristotle rejects both Platonic forms and (in some sense) the notion that knowledge is by some kind of illumination or direct vision of the forms. He holds, rather, that knowledge is a matter of abstracting universal concepts from particulars. How this happens, of course, became a matter of considerable debate, and I will look at it in later chapters.

Augustine was not the only conduit for Stoic ideas from antiquity. More important are the works of Cicero and (particularly) Seneca, critically translating and transmitting Stoic ideas in Latin. For example, one of the key features of Middle Stoicism, from Posidonius in the first century BCE, is the view that morality can be codified in some kind of natural *law* – not just legal norms, but universal *moral* norms binding all peoples. Perhaps the most significant statement of this for medieval philosophers is Cicero's *De officiis* (*On Duties*). Cicero structures *De officiis* around a possible conflict between the beneficial (*utile*) or advantageous (*commodi*), and the virtuous (*honestum*), of which latter the key component is justice (*iustitia*) (see *De officiis* II, c. 9 for a useful summary of the work's overall argument). Cicero's view is that there can never be any such conflict, since acting unjustly can never be truly advantageous (see *De officiis* III, cc. 21–4; c. 81); and given this he strives to show that justice is natural and thus that calculations of advantage are always subordinated to considerations of justice (see *De officiis* III, c. 11). He argues for this by claiming that just acts are regulated by 'the law of nations': a law that obtains independently of any established political power, and that states that 'one is not allowed to harm another for

the sake of one's own advantage' (*De officiis* III, n. 23 (trans. Griffin and Atkins, p. 108)). This 'rule of procedure' is supposed to provide a way for utility to coincide with virtue – since acting against the rule would tend to 'shatter [...] the fellowship of the whole human race' (*De officiis* III, n. 21 (trans. Griffin and Atkins, p. 108)): something that cannot be advantageous to the individual. (As he himself tells us, Cicero's Stoic source, incidentally, is Panaetius, not Posidonius.)

Stoic ethics are significant for much twelfth-century ethical thinking. Peter Abelard, for example, accepts the kind of natural law tradition that we can find in Cicero, but adds to it a very distinctive twist, adapting other aspects of Stoic action theory. The Stoics hold that a necessary condition for human happiness is *apatheia*: the ability not to be overcome by negative emotion or passion. The idea is not that the philosopher lacks emotions, but that he holds these emotions at some kind of distance, as it were: he refuses his *consent* to the emotion. Abelard adopts this notion of consent to give an account of the moral value of human action: moral evaluation depends on 'consent' to an action – not actually to performing the action, but simply being such that, if one could perform it, one would, where the rightness or wrongness of the consent depends on the action's status relative to the norms of natural law. (For the whole discussion, see Abelard, *Ethics* (also known as *Scito teipsum*).) Abelard's ethic of intention was unique in the Middle Ages, as far as I know. But his emphasis on law was not. For example, as we shall see, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74) proposes a full-scale adaptation of this way of thinking about ethics into an Aristotelian, teleological, context, using the legal approach as a way of radically recasting traditional Aristotelian virtue-ethics.

Augustine's thought was very influential on Boethius. I have already mentioned Boethius's role in transmitting the logical works of Aristotle and Porphyry, and I examine some of Boethius's own insights in Chapter 2, because they relate very particularly to twelfth-century thought, and I want to think about them in detail in that context. But Boethius too was also a significant transmitter of Platonic thought. For example, his very influential *Consolation of Philosophy* constitutes, among other things, a summary of Plato's *Timaeus*. It also contains perhaps the single most important discussion of God's knowledge of future contingents: God is timeless, and can thus 'see' the whole of time, including the future, laid out before him. But, generally, seeing something does not prevent it

from being contingent; neither is God's knowledge past or future, so it is not subject to the necessity of the past (if God knew *yesterday* what I would do today, then, since the past is fixed, what I do today is likewise fixed or pre-determined). (For the whole discussion, see Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* V, pr. 6.) Boethius also wrote theological treatises on the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, and on divine goodness, and these treatises themselves mediate vast amounts of basically Aristotelian metaphysics read through the lens of developments in Platonism and Augustine's theological version of Neoplatonism.

I have spoken of the significance of Augustine and Boethius in the transmission of broadly Platonic themes to the later Middle Ages. One further source for such material should not be overlooked: Pseudo-Dionysius, translated by John Scottus Eriugena in the ninth century, and of considerable importance for a theologically-inflected Platonism. We now know that this theologian was writing in the early sixth century. But he wrote under a pseudonym, and was throughout the Middle Ages believed to be St Paul's Athenian convert (see Acts 17.34). He was thus thought to be the first of the Church Fathers, and his writings were correspondingly given significant weight. Particularly important was Pseudo-Dionysius's analysis of religious language in *The Divine Names*. Each of the many discussions he includes of Biblical and Platonic names for God is structured according to the same dynamic: affirm the name of God – since God truly is such-and-such; deny the name of God – since God is not such-and-such in the same way as his creatures; and affirm that God transcends the name – since God is such-and-such in a 'supereminent' way. Dionysius presented a form of Christianity heavily influenced by the rather baroque Platonism of Proclus (c. 412–85). And Proclus himself later found his way into the West through another rather dense source: the so-called *Liber de causis* (a kind of summary of Proclus's *Elements of Theology*), translated by Gerard of Cremona from an Arabic text towards the end of the twelfth century. In all of these sources, the medievals found a potently hierarchical universe, full of participation relationships – quite un-Aristotelian. Eriugena himself was a rather suspect figure, and I think his influence on my period was more indirect – particularly through the translation work – than direct. And one Greek writer, translated into Latin in 1154/5 by Burgundio of Pisa, surpassed all Patristic theologians other than Augustine in influence: John of Damascus († c. 750), a magnificent

and highly intelligent encyclopedist of the entire earlier Greek theological tradition, and philosophically as much inclined towards Aristotelianism as towards any other kind of thinking.

An apophatic approach similar to Dionysius's can be found in another thinker too, likewise influential on the medieval Christian philosophers: the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). Maimonides argues that God is completely non-composite: he cannot have attributes, and the only true positive predications that can be made of both God and creatures in the same sense relate to activities (*Guide of the Perplexed* I, c. 52). God has nothing in common with any creature, and predications other than those of activity share nothing more than a name ('these attributions have in common only the name and nothing else') (*Guide of the Perplexed* I, c. 56 (trans. Pines, I, p. 131)). According to Maimonides, this does not result in the meaninglessness of these kinds of predications: he asserts that affirmative predications remove certain negations ('living' = 'not dead'; 'powerful' = 'not powerless'). Maimonides summarizes:

Every attribute that we predicate of him is an attribute of action or, if the attribute is intended for the apprehension of his essence and not of his action, it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question. (*Guide of the Perplexed* I, c. 58 (trans. Pines, I, p. 136))

Furthermore, God is a necessary existent; hence, given non-compositionality, his essence is just his existence (*Guide of the Perplexed* I, c. 57) – an insight that is important for Aquinas later on.

I said a moment ago that Aristotle revolutionized the medieval world view, and in later chapters I will suggest some of the ways in which this is the case. But as we have seen Aristotle in part initially came from the Islamic world, and in mining this sphere for philosophical texts the Christians found many additional resources: in particular, significant pieces of Muslim philosophy and theology. Relatively unproblematic was the reception of the greatest of all Muslim philosophers, Avicenna (ibn Sīnā) (980–1037), whose most important works were translated by Dominicus Gundisalvi sometime between 1160 and 1190. Avicenna seems to me to have been, along with Aristotle, by far the most important single philosophical influence on the Christian philosophers of the High Middle Ages – and something of the extent of this influence

will, I hope, become clear in later chapters. For example, medieval discussions of universals after the beginning of the thirteenth century typically take as their starting point neither Aristotle nor Augustine, but rather Avicenna. According to Avicenna, a universal is ‘what can be predicated of many’; as such, it includes neither its existence in a singular, nor its existence as a concept. Avicenna illustrates this with an example that was famous in the later Middle Ages: horseness, the nature of horse:

In itself, [horseness] is nothing at all except horseness; for, in itself, it is neither one nor many, and exists neither in concrete things nor in the soul, existing in none of these things either in potency or in act, such that [these] are included in horseness. Rather, in terms of itself, it is only horseness. Rather, oneness is an attribute that conjoins with horseness, whereby horseness with this attribute becomes one. Similarly, in addition to this attribute, horseness has many other attributes that enter it. Thus, horseness – on the condition that, in its definition, it corresponds to many things – becomes general. (Avicenna, *Metaphysics* V, c. 1 (trans. Marmura, p. 149))

The idea is that horseness, as such, is simply the essential properties of horses; it exists in horses provided that there are horses, and it exists in the soul, as a concept, provided that someone is thinking of it. Neither does horseness, as such, include any kind of unity or multiplicity. Provided that there is one horse it is one, and provided that there is more than one horse it is many – as many as there are horses.

These insights of Avicenna’s were of crucial significance for the understanding of universals in the thirteenth century. The background to Avicenna’s account is Alexander of Aphrodisias, and the kind of view that Avicenna defends was explicitly associated with Alexander in Boethius’s *Second commentary on Porphyry’s Isagoge*. (For discussion of all this, see Tweedale, 1984, pp. 279–303.) According to Alexander,

The common and universal [...] have their actual existence in material particulars; it is only when they are being known by an intellect that they become common and universal. (*De anima* III, § 28 (trans. Fotinis, pp. 118–19))

And Boethius claims that the solution to the problem of universals ‘agreeing with Alexander [of Aphrodisias]’ (*Second commentary on Porphyry’s Isagoge*, n. 23 (trans. Spade, p. 23)) involves claiming that

there is one subject for singularity and universality. But it is universal in one way, when it is thought, and singular in another, when it is sense in the things in which it has being. (*Second commentary on Porphyry’s Isagoge*, n. 32 (trans. Spade, p. 25))

Since Avicenna doubtless knew Alexander’s teaching too, we have in effect two routes through which it arrived in the Latin High Middle Ages: for the twelfth century, through Boethius; and for the thirteenth, through Avicenna as well.

Avicenna’s thought was not wholly unproblematic for Christians; but many of his insights were at least friendly to theologians. This is in stark contrast to another great Islamic philosopher, the Aristotelian commentator Averroes (ibn Rushd) (1126–98) – known from the thirteenth century in the West simply as the ‘Commentator’, such was his global importance in the interpretation of Aristotle (the ‘Philosopher’). The most significant commentaries of Averroes were translated by Michael Scot sometime between 1220 and 1235. Averroes’s close textual readings of Aristotle did nothing to attempt to mitigate theologically troublesome issues in Aristotle’s thought. For example, Aristotle believed that the world must lack a beginning. The world is in motion, and a thing cannot just start to move, with no explanation. So there must always have been motion (*Physics* VIII, c. 1 (251a8–b10)). Averroes, similarly, objected to creation, but for a different (though still Aristotelian) reason. According to Aristotle, production requires some kind of substrate – something to be *altered* in the production. Averroes agreed, and rightly saw that creation does not satisfy this condition. Creation is thus unintelligible (see Averroes, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (trans. van den Bergh, I, p. 273)).

All of this is evidently problematic for monotheistic religions that believe in a created universe. What interpretative strategies were available for a Christian theologian? One could attempt to read Aristotle charitably – in such a way that he is not read as definitively positing a beginningless universe, but merely as making a suggestion for dialectical purposes. In all of his works up to and

including the *prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, completed by the middle of 1268, Aquinas takes this line. He basically makes three exegetical proposals, all of which claim that the arguments are not 'strictly speaking demonstrative'. The first is that the Aristotelian arguments are merely *ad hominem*, designed to challenge the views of his opponents. Secondly, Aristotle's use of authorities means that he aims to persuade in a case that he knows no genuine arguments. And, thirdly, in any case, it seems that Aristotle explicitly states elsewhere that there are no good arguments on either side of the issue. (For all three strategies, see *Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 1 c.)

In his *Physics* commentary, written in late 1268 and 1269, Aquinas argues against his own sympathetic take on Aristotle:

Others, trying in vain to show that Aristotle did not speak against the faith, said that Aristotle did not intend to show, as something true, that that motion is perpetual, but to introduce arguments for both sides, as for something doubtful. But this seems foolish, given [Aristotle's] way of proceeding. And furthermore, he used the perpetuity of time and motion as a premise to show that the first principle exists, both here in [*Physics*] VIII, and in *Metaphysics* XII. So it is evident that he took this to be something proven. (*In octo libros Physicorum expositio* VIII, l. 2, n. 986)

By 'others', of course, Aquinas means himself – and he here takes a rather dim view of his earlier efforts.

Another interpretative strategy, by way of mitigation of Aristotle's apparent view, would be to claim that God's perfect nature, as creator, requires that there are some things that he always causes. This was Avicenna's take on the issue: Avicenna held that God necessarily and eternally causes the highest immaterial being, but that this eternal causation is compatible with that being's being created (see *Metaphysics* VI, c. 2). Or, alternatively, one could embrace the Aristotelian view about the factual eternity of the world, and argue from this that the world cannot be created. One could, in short, maintain a view incompatible with monotheism. Averroes and his thirteenth-century Latin enthusiasts (on whom, see the last section of Chapter 5 below) did not quite do this, though they certainly held that Aristotle was committed to the eternity of the world and that it was not possible to find intellectual grounds on which to



rebut the view. This kind of position is known as *fideism*: believing something even when it appears that there are good reasons against the belief. It is not the healthiest of intellectual attitudes, though it has been embraced by some eminent theologians, motivated by the view that faith and reason have nothing to do with each other, or are properly hostile to each other.

One way of avoiding fideism on this question would be to agree that the view is indeed Aristotelian, but to hold too that it can be shown to be false. This was the line followed by Bonaventure (c. 1217–74) – partly using arguments about the infinite that originate in the Persian philosopher al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111; translated by Dominicus Gundisalvi and Magister Johannes sometime between 1160 and 1190). Bonaventure argues that, if the universe were infinitely old, then there would already have been infinitely many days. But this is impossible since (as Aristotle himself points out) it is impossible to reach the end of an infinite distance:

It is impossible to traverse infinitely many things. But if the universe did not begin, then there will have been infinitely many revolutions [of the sun]; therefore it is impossible to traverse them; therefore it was impossible to reach up to this [current one]. If you say that they are not traversed, because none was first, or that they can certainly be traversed in infinite time, you do not in this way evade the conclusion. For I ask from you whether some revolution infinitely distant preceded today's one, or none did. If none, then they are all finitely distant from today's one; therefore they had a beginning. If one was infinitely distant, then I ask about the revolution that immediately followed it, whether that one was infinitely distant [from today's one]. If not, then neither was the first one infinitely distant, because a finite distance will be between both of them; if it was indeed infinitely distant, then I ask likewise about the third, and the fourth, and so on to infinity. Therefore one was no more distant from this one than from another; therefore one is not prior to another; therefore they are all simultaneous. (*Commentaria in libros sententiarum* II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, arg. 3)

Clearly, there are defects in this argument, and I will return to them in a moment. The opponents of Bonaventure found a different argument about the infinite more challenging:

It is impossible for an infinite number of things to exist all at once. But if the world was eternal, without a beginning, since it does not exist without human beings (for it is in some way on account of human beings that all things are), and since a human being only exists for a finite time, it follows that infinitely many human beings have existed. But there have been as many rational souls as there have been human beings. Therefore there have been infinitely many souls. But there are as many souls as there have been, since souls are incorruptible. Therefore there are infinitely many souls. (*Commentaria in libros sententiarum* II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, arg. 5)

And Bonaventure claims, too, that the proofs for the existence of God all show that the universe must have been created: and what is created is brought about *from nothing* (*ex nihilo*) – and thus, *after* nothing (*Commentaria in libros sententiarum* II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, arg. 6).

These arguments are hard to refute. But Aquinas, who was generally notably sympathetic to Aristotle's views, and who as much as anyone else attempted to make them his own, had a try. Aquinas's position is that it is impossible to show that the world had a beginning, and impossible to show that it did not. Given the requirements of Christian orthodoxy, this view is, I think, a position maximally generous to Aristotle. For Aquinas, it is entirely a matter of faith that the world – even if created – had a beginning (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2 c). This might sound like an odd claim, but we can get a good sense of how Aquinas understood it if we look at Aquinas's reply to the last of Bonaventure's objections to Aristotle's view just mentioned. To make something from nothing does not mean that there is a very thin kind of something – call it 'nothing' – from which God crafted the universe. What it means is that it is not the case that God, in making the universe, made it from something:

Those who posit an eternal world would say that the world is made by God from nothing, not because it was made after nothing (which is how we understand the term 'creation'), but because it was not made from something. (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2 ad 2)

This has the startling consequence that the universe could be both created and yet lack a beginning. In exploring the implications of Aristotle's view of the universe, Aquinas has in effect produced a wholly new version of the Christian doctrine of creation: creation is the *total dependence* of the universe on God; and this total dependence is not itself a function of the universe's having a beginning.<sup>1</sup>

I say that Aquinas's view has this startling consequence. I should say that it *would* do, were it the case that Aquinas knew how to refute Bonaventure's arguments about the infinite. He makes an attempt. On the impossibility of traversing an infinite distance, he suggests that Bonaventure is thinking of the extension the wrong way round, as it were: it is not as though we have to reach a point infinitely far from us (impossible, since there is no such point); rather, we have already traversed the magnitude: it is bounded at the *present* end:

Traversal is always understood to be from one end to another. But whatever past day is pinpointed, there are finitely many days from that one to this; and these can be traversed. The objection proceeds as though there are infinitely many intervening days, given the extremes. (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2 ad 6)

Aquinas thus puts his finger precisely on the mistake in Bonaventure's argument. It does not follow, contrary to Bonaventure's assertion, from the fact that 'all [days are] finitely distant from today's one' that 'therefore they had a beginning'.

But this, of course, still relies on the possibility of an actual infinite – there is, after all, the set of all past days, and this set is infinite; and making sense of this requires the transfinite mathematics first proposed by Georg Cantor in the 1870s and 1880s – though we shall see in subsequent chapters a couple of thinkers start to make a little progress on the mathematical issue. In fact, Aquinas persistently and rightly asserted, from his earliest writing on the subject (the *Sentence* commentary) to the latest (*De aeternitate mundi*), that the problem of an infinite set is raised most acutely by the second of Bonaventure's arguments quoted above. In the *Summa theologiae* he gives solutions proposed by others (but that he would reject – e.g. al-Ghazālī's assertion that an actual infinite is possible (see *Metaphysics* I, tr. 1, div. 7 (trans. Muckle, pp. 41–2)) – and then comments, rather indecisively, that the

objection relates merely to human beings, not to creation in general (see *Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2 ad 8). Aquinas does nothing to address Bonaventure's supporting argument here, that 'it is in some way on account of human beings that all things are'. Behind Aristotle's eternity argument is a very different assumption: that the universe exists invariantly – it is always fully formed, and at any given time contains all the kinds that it ever does. This is quite unlike the Christian view, and I provide some contrasting accounts (in Augustine and Bonaventure) in Chapter 3. At any rate, making humanity the *telos* or goal of the material world does the same work in Bonaventure's criticism as invariancy does in Aristotle.

Elsewhere, Aquinas takes a different and more radical path – agreeing (against his view in the *Summa theologiae*) with al-Ghazālī's affirmation of the possibility of an actual infinite: 'Besides, it has not been proven that God could not create an actual infinite' (*De aeternitate mundi* (trans. McInerny, p. 717)). Of course, Aquinas himself had spent many years endeavouring, as a good Aristotelian, to prove just that; and in effect this puts Aristotle in conflict with Aristotle, since, in order to maintain the coherence of Aristotle's view on the possible eternity of the world, Aquinas has to reject what Aristotle has to say about the actual infinite.

The problems Aristotle's views on topics other than logic might raise for Christian theology led to his rather stormy reception in the thirteenth century. Philosophers and theologians were, on the one hand, strongly motivated to study Aristotle; on the other hand, at least some of them also perceived the dangers. Difficulties started almost immediately. One of the most interesting condemnations at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), under Pope Innocent III, surrounds the rather Platonic thinker Amalric of Bène (d. 1206), tending to identify God and the world (a development of a strong Neoplatonic emphasis, mediated through John Scottus Eriugena, on divine immanence). Amalric (none of whose writings survive) was condemned at a synod, under Peter Corbeil (Archbishop of Sens) and Peter of Nemours (Bishop of Paris), at Paris, in 1210, and again at Lateran IV in 1215. From the point of view of the assimilation of Aristotle, this condemnation is significant for its connection with another thinker, David of Dinant (d. 1214). David is one of the key reporters of Amalric's view, surviving in David's now fragmentary *Quaternuli*. David develops some of Amalric's insights in a decidedly Aristotelian direction. He starts from

Aristotle's distinction between the possible intellect and the agent intellect. Aristotle's agent intellect somehow abstracts the forms of particulars, and thus has a role in our forming universal concepts; the possible intellect is somehow receptive of such concepts. David argues that the possible intellect understands matter, and can do so only if 'it has some similarity to it or is identical with it'. But, David reasons, it cannot be similar to matter, because that would involve both matter and intellect being 'passive and subject to the same received attribute, such as two white things or two black things'. Since mind and matter cannot satisfy this condition, they must be 'identical' with each other; from which David concludes

It is clear, therefore, that there is only one substance, not only of all bodies but also of all souls, and this substance is nothing other than God himself. And the substance from which all bodies come is called 'matter' [...] while the substance from which all souls come is called 'reason' or 'mind'. [...] It is therefore manifest that God is the reason of all souls, and the matter of all bodies. (*Quaternuli*, p. 71, in Dronke, 1988, p. 440)

Despite apparently being an associate of Innocent III, David's writings (though not person) were condemned at the Synod of Paris in 1210 (for relying excessively on Aristotle's *libri naturales*), though neither David nor his work was mentioned at Lateran IV. Clearly, his is a very odd reading of Aristotle. It is perhaps, more than anything else, a testimony both to the difficulties that faced early interpreters of Aristotle, and to the problems that Aristotelian philosophy might in principle raise for the Christian faith.

Lateran IV was interesting from another Aristotelian perspective, too: it defined the doctrine of transubstantiation using, in effect, notions from Aristotle's *Categories* (a work which, as I have already noted, was dominant in twelfth-century philosophy): the substance of the Eucharistic bread is transubstantiated into Christ's body, but the species (i.e. the *accidents*) of the bread remain (Lateran IV, const. 1).

The Parisian synod was, at least temporarily, rather important in the reception of the rest of Aristotle, however, for, along with condemning both Amalric and the works of David, it banned 'lectures in Paris, either publicly or privately [...] on Aristotle's books about natural philosophy' (*Chartularium universitatis parisiensis*, n. 11 (I,