

Medieval British philosophers

The British Academy series 'Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi' ('Medieval British Authors') is making available texts and translations that demonstrate Britain's rich medieval philosophical heritage. The series Director, Professor John Marenbon FBA, explains why it is so important that such works should be edited and published today.

THE MIDDLE AGES' conjures up images of a strange bygone world of castles and knights, peasants tilling the fields, great cathedrals packed with unquestioning believers. We are less likely to bring to mind one of the great medieval European inventions that now flourishes and moulds societies worldwide – the university. And even less to think of the activity most prized in the medieval universities, and still cultivated today, though, alas, with less energy and esteem – doing philosophy. True, there is no medieval term equivalent to what we now mean by 'philosophy'. But medieval thinkers undoubtedly tackled questions that we recognise as philosophical (rarely the same question as that posed by contemporary philosophers, but ones clearly related), both in studying what they called the 'arts' (the curriculum of Aristotelian sciences, including physics and biology, as well as logic and metaphysics) and in theology. What is more, their approach and methods bear an uncanny similarity to those of 21st-century professional Anglophone philosophers. Like them, the medieval philosophers sought clarity and precision above all else, despising rhetoric and not being shy to use technical language where necessary. Like contemporary philosophers, medieval thinkers were highly trained in logic, and they gave scrupulous attention to the exact form in which they made their claims and the validity of the arguments through which they drew their conclusions.

Philosophy was more international in the Middle Ages than it is today, when different languages tend to be linked to different approaches. Latin was the universal language of the medieval schools and universities, and students and professors moved with ease around Europe, with Paris the great centre from the early 1100s onwards. But Britain has a special place in medieval philosophy. There was even a period, in the first part of the 14th century – rather like those years in the early 20th century, when the Cambridge-based thinkers Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein transformed philosophy – when Britain was absolutely outstanding. John Duns Scotus, who rethought almost every area of philosophy, studied and taught at Oxford in the years up to 1300, before going to Paris. Writers such as Walter Burley, Walter Chatton, Robert Holcot, Adam Wodeham, Thomas Bradwardine and, most famous of all, William of Ockham made Oxford eclipse even Paris in the half century that followed. The British contribution to philosophy stretches back, however, to long before the universities. Alcuin, who had spent his life in York before becoming Charlemagne's intellectual advisor at the end of the 8th century, is arguably the first Latin thinker since the ancient world to start posing philosophical questions. Anselm, perhaps the most profoundly brilliant of all medieval thinkers, though born in Aosta in Italy, and for many years a monk of Bec in Normandy, is considered, as Archbishop of Canterbury, an honorary



Figure 2. A 15th-century image of a bishop, identified by the 19th-century inscription below as Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln. From the parish church of St Helen, in Lea, Lincolnshire. Photo: Gordon Plumb.

Figure 1. Image of St Anselm in Canterbury Cathedral. Photo: CVMA inv. no. 000700.

Englishman (Figure 1). And a leading Parisian teacher of the 12th century, Adam of the Petit-Pont, who pioneered a formal understanding of logic, was born in a manor house at Balsham, near Cambridge. From the time of Robert Grosseteste (c.1168-1253), philosophy in Britain was closely connected with Oxford University (Figure 2). Grosseteste himself, and scholars such as Adam of Buckfield, Geoffrey of Aspill, Robert Kilwardby and – if the commentaries attributed to him are really his – Richard Rufus of Cornwall, were pioneers in explaining Aristotelian logic and philosophy. And after the brilliant years from 1330 to 1350, the Oxford tradition was continued in the second half of the century by men such as John Wyclif (a daring and original philosopher as well as a religious reformer), Chaucer's friend Ralph Strode and Richard Brinkley.

It requires only a small stretch of the imagination to see how fascinating as philosophy this material can be. Consider just the very first volume of the *Auctores Britannici* series, and the most recent one – the 17 volumes between, and the more now promised, would provide many more examples.¹

Anselm

The very first volume of the series, published over 40 years ago, is a collection of materials relating to Anselm.² Most of the texts are of interest to historians rather than philosophers, but there is a striking exception: a manuscript in Lambeth contains a series of exercises in philosophical analysis – discussions of wanting, being able, doing and of what is meant by 'something'. Even the first few lines give the flavour. 'Want' can be used in the sense in which a sick man *wants* to be well: if he can do something to make himself well, he does; if he cannot, then he would do it, if he could. But there is another sense of 'want', in which I can want something, but not do what I could to bring it about: I might *want* a pauper not to be naked, but do nothing to clothe him. And there is another sense: suppose my creditor cannot give me the corn he owes, but only (much less expensive) barley: I *want* to take the barley – rather than receive nothing at all, though at

the same time I do not want the barley, since I would prefer corn. This is just the beginning of an intricate discussion, but it shows how Anselm, like many a philosopher in recent decades, starts out from the conceptual distinctions found in ordinary language.

Thomas Wylton

The most recent addition to the *Auctores* series is the *Quaestio de anima intellectiva (On the Intellectual Soul)*, written by the Oxford philosopher Thomas Wylton in Paris in the years before 1320.³ By contrast with Anselm, Wylton might seem to be concerned with a positively outlandish problem: explaining and justifying the view, championed by the Arabic interpreter of Aristotle, Averroes, that there is just one ‘material intellect’ for all human beings. In fact, Averroes’s interpretation of Aristotle could be seen as a good way of accounting for the shared, impersonal character of scientific knowledge. But what is more striking about this discussion is its initial setting. Wylton accepts that the Averroistic view is not correct, because it goes against the teaching of the Church. Yet it is this view that he will spend thousands of words in developing, interpreting and defending, because it is the one that can best be defended by natural reasoning, whereas the true Christian view must be accepted on faith alone. Like so many medieval philosophers – but contrary to the popular stereotype of them today – Wylton is able to engage in an investigation that is itself entirely rational and scientific, although he does not call into question the truth of Church teaching.

Scholarly editing

Bringing a work like Anselm’s or Wylton’s into the form of an accessible, edited, printed text is an extraordinarily time-consuming and skilled job. First, the manuscripts must be transcribed. Whilst scribes in the earlier Middle Ages used an easily-readable form of handwriting that was revived in the Renaissance and provided the model for print, most medieval philosophical manuscripts are written in difficult to decipher Gothic and late medieval scripts. Since parchment and then paper was precious, the hands are often tiny; and a complex system of abbreviations was used to save more space. Only someone specially trained in the reading of medieval handwriting, with an excellent command of Latin, and who also fully understands the often highly technical discussions in the text can set about the task. Usually, there will be more than one manuscript, and often dozens. They are rarely authorial autographs, and so the editor needs to collate and classify the manuscripts, so as to reconstruct as well as possible the text the author intended. And

then, if the text is to be accessible and useful, the sources it uses and references it makes must be sought out, a translation provided, and an introduction written on the work’s context and contents.

Unfortunately, universities and funding bodies in Britain today seem blind both to the fundamental value of such editions for scholarship and to the extraordinary skills needed in those who make them. Any genuine scholar of the Middle Ages, even one not personally inclined to text-editing, recognises that, without new editions, scholarship in the area is condemned to try to build without foundations, and that editing a text is one of the supreme tests of a medievalist’s training and ability. Yet officially far less credit is given for the years of patient work required to produce a good edition than to a few articles or a monograph that catch a fashionable theme and will probably no longer be read in a few years – whereas a good edition can still be useful a century later. It is a tribute to a certain self-sacrificing integrity that so many scholars continue to come forward to make available, through their painstaking work, more of the philosophical heritage of medieval Britain – but sad that so few of them have been trained or work in this country.

Notes

- 1 Of the philosophers mentioned in the last paragraph, Grosseteste and Kilwardby are the objects of a continuing collection of editions in the series, which is also publishing Aristotelian commentaries attributed to Richard Rufus; Ockham’s immense political work, the *Dialogus*, will soon be starting to appear, and editions of work by Aspill, Strode and Brinkley are promised. A critical edition of Alcuin’s logical treatise and a translation of Adam of Petit Pont’s *Ars disserendi* are among the desiderata, as is an edition of Bradwardine’s very long, difficult but extremely influential *De causa Dei*.
- 2 *Memorials of St. Anselm*, ed. R.W. Southern and F.S. Schmitt (*Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi*, I; 1969). The series hopes to publish an English translation of the whole volume in the coming years.
- 3 *Thomas Wylton: On the Intellectual Soul*, ed. L.O. Nielsen and C. Trifogli, translation by G. Trimble (*Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi*, 19; 2010).

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For more on the *Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi* series, go to www.britac.ac.uk/pubs

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