



Medieval Philosophy

Anthony Kenny

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Sir Anthony Kenny here continues his fascinating account of the history of philosophy, focusing on the thousand-year-long medieval period. This is the second volume of a four-book set in which Kenny will unfold a magisterial new history of Western philosophy, the first major single-author history of philosophy to appear in decades.

In this volume, Kenny takes us on a fascinating tour through more than a millennium of thought from 400 AD onwards, charting the story of philosophy from the founders of Christian and Islamic thought through to the Renaissance. The Middle Ages saw a great flourishing of philosophy, and the intellectual endeavor of the era reaches its climax in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with the systems of the great schoolmen such as Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. With Kenny as guide, we see these major philosophers through the eyes of a man who has spent a lifetime contemplating their work. Thus we do not simply get an overview of philosophy, but also a penetrating and insightful critique of it. Kenny offers an illuminating account of various thinkers and schools of thought, from Augustine to Maimonides and from Grosseteste to Pomponazzi. And he offers much insight into medieval thinking about logic and language, knowledge, physics, metaphysics, the mind, the soul, and God.

Vividly written, but serious and deep enough to offer a genuine understanding of the great philosophers, Kenny's lucid and stimulating history will become the definitive work for anyone interested in the people and ideas that shaped the course of Western thought.

Medieval Philosophy Details

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From Reader Review Medieval Philosophy for online ebook

Thomas Dodson says

I finally finished this book! I'm ready for the agent intellect to beam me up!

????? says

The stars of this volume are Augustine, Aquinas, Avicenna, Scotus, and Ockham.

Maya says

This is the second volume of the history of philosophy. It deals with the history of philosophy and the concepts of it during the Hellenistic era going through to St. Augustine, Abelard, Aquinas, Scotus, Okham, and some Islamic and Jewish philosophers as well. Even though my interest is in the Ethics portion of this I enjoyed reading the whole book.

Betawolf says

Something of a mixed review, here. I found the second book in Kenny's ambitious series to be less impressive than the first, certainly, but I can't rule out that the main reasons for this were largely out of the author's control. The philosophy of the medieval period itself seems to be at fault, more than anything else, for how uninteresting I find vast portions of the book.

Kenny does anticipate some of this in his introduction, although he makes what I think are finally unjustified efforts to defend the period. The majority of the philosophy expounded upon _does_ seem to be an offshoot of theology or apologetics for the Christian faith, and what thought there is of value amongst that seems to be fundamentally bankrupted by having to share its space with dogma. The one area where this might not be said to apply is that of logic, where scholastic thinkers made some strides to pull apart purely linguistic confusions inherent in the still confused systems of deduction -- but this topic was painful to read for another reason, in that so much of the analysis seems to flounder painfully on the shores of clarity, and without the charm similar flaws had in the texts of the ancients. Other areas were hopeless. The less said about the ethics of the Christian philosophers, the better.

Moving the problems with the content aside, with some difficulty, I think there is still a justified criticism of the way Kenny reports on it, in comparison to the first volume. The chronological section of the first volume seemed like an edifying trip through the history of philosophy, but the same section of this volume felt less rewarding -- too crowded with argumentative figures who did not flourish with the same detail as the ancients. Several times I felt I was told that some development was important, without being given an opportunity to understand the significance for myself. However, I cannot charge that the book was not informative, opening up at least an overview of the period that lets me situate some shards from other

reading.

I am conflicted now in my expectations for the further volumes. On one hand, the modern philosophers probably escape the worst of the apologetics and theology, and so my problems with content might be alleviated, but on the other I suspect the cast of characters is going to get much larger, and if Kenny hopes to cover the figures with the same pagecount I might find the descriptions becoming intolerably short and crowded.

Shoaib Nagi says

A very informative and well-written introduction to Medieval Philosophy from St. Augustine to William Ockham. The thematic division of the book helps the reader understand different branches of philosophy in a more coherent manner. To take an example, the author describes the ethical philosophy of St. Augustine under the chapter dedicated exclusively to Medieval Ethics and his theology under the chapter dedicated to God. In this manner, the entire voluminous philosophical output of a philosopher is not crammed down the reader's throat in an instant.

Moreover, Anthony Kenny also gives an insight into Islamic philosophy. He introduces the reader to the theology of Al-Kindi, the metaphysics of Avicenna and the logic of Averroes. It isn't as detailed as it should be (e.g. Kenny doesn't mention Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Arabi or Al-Ghazali), but compared to other books on the history of philosophy, it is still a good start.

John says

This fine book, the second volume in Kenny's *A New History of Western Philosophy*, provides an overview of the major figures and issues in the philosophy of the European Middle Ages. Kenny takes an "intellectual history" approach in the opening section to provide necessary historical context and biographical information on the major figures he will be discussing. In the longer second part of the book, he turns to philosophical issues per se, tackling, in turn, "Logic and Language," "Knowledge," "Physics," "Metaphysics," "Mind and Soul," "Ethics," and "God." Kenny organizes this discussion around a who's who of the major medieval philosophers, including Augustine, Boethius, Avicenna, Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Ockham. The chapters on ethics and God, topics so important in the Christian philosophical matrix of the Middle Ages, are very good, but it is the chapter on logic and language that stood out to me as being particularly interesting--Kenny highlights the ways in which medieval thinkers were anticipating issues in the philosophy of language that have been very hot topics among philosophers of the last century.

Kenny's book will be useful to anyone with a more-than-casual interest in philosophy or in medieval intellectual history. It may prove too difficult for absolute beginners with no philosophical background. Non-specialist academics and students, among others, will relish the book both for the helpfulness of its content and for the charm and grace of Kenny's writing.

Rebecca Lovatt says

This is an interesting introduction to medieval philosophy and some of the philosophers of the time. It studies the concepts of St. Augustine, Abelard, Aquinas, Scotus, and Okham, along with a few others, exploring topics such as Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Logic and Language.

I found it to be a bit confusing at times, however it was informative and well-written.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Some good stuff but I am not digging the concept format of the presentation. It is organized by topic not chronologically or biographically and this ruins the narrative flow and yes good nonfiction needs a narrative. We think in stories and without a narrative, the book reads like a catalog. That subtracts from the substance.

Jacqueline Quackenbush says

This book is the second in a four part series on the history of western philosophy. Following from the first volume on the progression of ancient philosophy, this addition to the series spans the progression of western philosophical thought from the conversion of Augustine to the beginnings of the Renaissance. Like its predecessor, the first two chapters of this book cover a general summary of the major philosophers of the time, with the final seven chapters analyzing the development of philosophical thought in regards to specific issues such as god, ethics, and logic.

My major complaint with this volume is the same one I discussed in my review on the first book of the series; I found the organization sometimes difficult as, opposed to discussing a philosopher's views as a whole, their views were individually discussed by topic through each of the last seven chapters. This organization has its upsides, I'm sure, but I couldn't help but find it difficult to organize the wealth of separately discussed views under any single philosopher, leaving me with only a few facts about each philosopher that I can accurately remember. So, while I feel like I walked away from this book with a good understanding of the major philosophical questions of this era, I can't say I recall very much about any one specific philosopher.

Despite this, I did learn quite a good deal from this book. If nothing else, I feel as if I now understand much more clearly the academic and religious atmosphere of the time much better. While I have not studied philosophy in any depth before, I have done a fair share of reading on history and prior to reading this I sometimes found it difficult to understand the general climate of the times in comparison with my own modern day life. Exactly how the church managed to sway such influence throughout history seems much clearer to me now that I've read through the types of philosophical dilemmas that absorbed the great minds of the time, and learned of the sometimes vitriolic backlash that occurred to even the silliest seeming bits of heresy.

So, definitely continue this series if you have begun it; there is a wealth of information to be had. For those looking to get more out of it than I myself did, I recommend utilizing Wikipedia and google to recap about specific philosophers as you read through it. I also wish I had read a little more on formal logic before beginning this tome as it would have made numerous sections much more clear to me.

All and all, this series is shaping up to be a rather solid introduction to western philosophical thought, although it is definitely worth it to through in a little extra effort to get the most out of it.

If you liked this review, you can read others as well as a number of articles on the topic of self-education at my blog

IWB says

A good introductory survey of philosophical topics as they were treated by various medieval thinkers throughout the entire period, from late antiquity and the commentators of Aristotle, to the inception of the humanists. The survey combines what is properly called intellectual history and philosophy proper. The historical aspect is kept to a minimum (as it ought to be in a philosophy book) without sacrificing salient features of the historical context in which the topic under discussion occurred. The philosophy, on the other hand, is more developed and Kenny has an emphasis on concept explanation, as opposed to explicating arguments; though he does do both at times.

This includes the following topics: God, Mind and Soul, Logic and Language, Knowledge, Physics, Metaphysics, Ethics, as well as an excellent treatment of philosophy and religious belief from Augustine to Maimonides, and scholasticism from the twelfth century renaissance (Abelard and the 'nominales' school) to the so-called renaissance proper (roughly 1360-1550), at which point scholasticism began to give way to the new schoolman, the humanists.

Kenny is especially good at explaining the intellectual current of a given period and how such a current has bearing on the topic at hand, this is particularly seen in his discussion of physics. As such, the historical context of each topic and its subsequent development is presented thoroughly but briefly; however, little attention is given to the explication of any particular thinker's arguments on any given topics. For that reason, you will find little critical analysis of is presented.

All in all it is an excellent work, written clearly and informatively, by a very capable philosopher. It's a good introduction for undergraduates at the freshman and sophomore level. But if you've had more than a survey course in medieval philosophy, you need something with a bit more depth.

Jeffrey Backlin says

Second part of a four volume set: medieval philosophy.

Patris says

A brief overview of medieval philosophy....

Paul says

An excellent introductory and thematic text, usefully organized into thematic chapters (metaphysics, logic, ethics, etc.) following a couple of useful chapters on the intellectual history of the period. Kenny's discussions of various topics are nicely balanced between explanatory glosses and more detailed explications of knotty problems. I read this book because, despite half a lifetime as a student of philosophy, my knowledge of the subject after Aristotle but before Descartes was woeful, limited to Boethius and some Augustine.

While the overwhelming context of Christian theology and doctrine unavoidably colors the book, Kenny does a nice job contextualizing the debates and developments and highlights the importance of Al-Farabi, Averroes, Avicenna, and other non-Christian thinkers of the era.

Having read this, I doubt that I'll read any further into the philosophy of the period, because (under the crushing imperium of the Catholic Church) the era was not replete with interesting developments in ethics or political philosophy, my primary areas of philosophical interest. It's nice to feel like I did take a sip before dismissing the drink as not to my taste.
