

PHILOSOPHY IN THE LATIN CHRISTIAN WEST: 750–1050



THE revival of philosophy after the Dark Ages (roughly 525–750) was a drawn-out process, lasting nearly three centuries. The only philosopher worthy of the name between BOETHIUS at the end of Antiquity and the twelfth-century genius of ANSELM and PETER ABELARD was the anomalous JOHN SCOTTUS ERIUGENA, whose extraordinary knowledge of Greek allowed him direct access to ancient philosophical and theological literature, presumably the inspiration for his strikingly original neoplatonic metaphysics. Aside from Eriugena there was little philosophy to speak of. The work of summary, paraphrase, gloss, and transmission absorbed most of the intellectual energies of several generations. Yet there were signs and stirrings of interest in philosophy throughout the period, if not for its own sake then as an adjunct to religious and theological speculation.

The first important thinker in the revival of philosophy was the English monk Alcuin of York (735–804), whose sojourn at the court of Charlemagne near the end of the eighth century gave him wide influence on the Continent. Alcuin and his many students were the heirs and imitators of the earlier mediæval encyclopædists—Cassiodorus, Martianus Cappella, ISIDORE OF SEVILLE—who tried to preserve classical learning for an uncertain future, and their efforts were equally wide-ranging and diffuse. Alcuin, in his *Dialogue on True Philosophy*, which serves as an introduction to his school-texts collectively known as the *Didascalion*, identifies the “seven stages of philosophy” with the liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. But to identify philosophy with the whole of human intellectual endeavor is to miss the distinguishing feature of philosophy proper, namely reasoned argument directed at first principles. In this narrower sense, Alcuin’s discussion of philosophy is largely confined to the treatise on dialectic, covering the material traditionally known as the ‘old logic’ (*logica vetus*). Like most of the treatises in the *Didascalion*, it is written as an elementary question/answer catechism between Charlemagne and Alcuin. Here is a sample: “Charlemagne: ‘How should a syllogism be constructed?’ Alcuin: ‘Typically from three elements so that from the first two premisses the third follows as the conclusion.’” The raw materials of logic, philosophy of language, and metaphysics are presented in this simplified textbook fashion.

Alcuin wrote three works of dogmatic theology that suggest a wider ac-

quaintance with philosophy than do his school texts. *Belief in the Holy and Undivided Trinity*, for the most part an epitome of AUGUSTINE'S masterwork *The Trinity*, recounts the African Doctor's theory of relative predication in the Trinity and analyzes a miscellany of questions suggested by dogma, for instance whether Christ had full knowledge of his own divinity. While Alcuin does not contribute anything original to these discussions, they offer a summary of arguments and distinctions that suggest how philosophy might be done systematically. Likewise, his shorter works *The Nature of the Soul* and *The Virtues and Vices* respectively epitomize Augustine's *The Nature and Origin of the Soul* and some of his sermons, in each case reproducing key lines of argument in the original works.

Alcuin was followed in the work of paraphrase and explanation by his student Rhabanus Maurus (776–856), whose massive *Rules for Clerics*, a compendium of Christian practice, follows Alcuin's identification of philosophy with the seven liberal arts. But he adds that Christians should have the same attitude to works of philosophy, especially those written by Platonists, as the Israelites had to their Egyptian masters: carry off only what is valuable (*Exodus* 12:35–36). Rhabanus identifies dialectic with philosophy in the narrower sense, namely “the discipline of rational inquiry” (*Rules* 3.20), and he seems to mean by this any activity using logical or syllogistic reasoning. Rhabanus says nothing about any specifically philosophical topics or questions, though. Most of his writings on religious matters were low-level exegesis and edifying commentary rather than rigorous logical inquiries, and he generally avoided issues in dogmatic theology. Yet Rhabanus also composed a *Treatise on the Soul*, which alternated summary and paraphrase of Augustine with original discussion of the issues. For instance, Rhabanus argues that the soul cannot have a form, since forms are geometrical shapes and therefore only apply to corporeal items, whereas the soul is incorporeal. In addition to such claims, Rhabanus discusses the virtues as the psychologically distinctive feature of the soul.

Some of Alcuin's students showed a particular interest in logic and the philosophy of language, though no great sophistication. Fridugisus (782?–834), who succeeded Alcuin as abbot of St. Martin's in Tours, wrote a letter about the kind of being that nothingness and shadows have—a problem he took to be posed by the requirement that every finite noun signify something, in which case ‘nothing’ must signify something. The English monk Candidus (Wizo), who became head of Charlemagne's palace school when Alcuin departed for Tours, wrote some short notes investigating logical puzzles having to do with the Trinity. He compiled a record of such inquiries by members of Alcuin's circle, which range from mere excerpts of Patristic

authors to apparently original investigations into questions such as the location of the soul in space, whether truth is something physical, and even an attempt to prove the existence of God; these short notes betray familiarity not only with Augustine but also with the old logic, and a commendable enterprise in applying their knowledge to theological issues.

The next generation of thinkers was dominated by John Scottus Eriugena and witnessed an increase in philosophical sophistication, harnessed more than ever to the service of theological problems. Around the middle of the ninth century several doctrinal controversies erupted. The first was precipitated by Gottschalk of Orbais (805–866), who argued on scriptural and patristic grounds that God predestined some for salvation and some for damnation, and furthermore that this was the view of Augustine; Eriugena was called in, by Hincmar, Archbishop of Reims, to write a rebuttal of Gottschalk's views, and he effectively ended the debate by uniting all opposed sides against his views.

Around the same time Paschasius Radbertus revised his treatise on the Eucharist (*The Lord's Body and Blood*), raising questions about Christ's real presence: Is the body in the host the same as Christ's historical body? How can this body be present in the host in many places and many times? What change occurs in the bread and wine in consecration? Radbertus argued that Christ's historical body is present in the host, though veiled by the continued appearance of bread and wine, and that this one body must therefore be present in all places and times, presumably by God's incomprehensible direct creative activity. Charles the Bald then asked Ratramnus of Corbie (died after 868) to respond to Radbertus. Ratramnus then wrote his own *The Lord's Body and Blood*, in which he argued that Christ's presence in the host is spiritual rather than corporeal, so that there is no real change in the bread and wine—which are now called 'the body and blood of Christ' in virtue of representing them. Furthermore, Christ's spiritual body and spiritual blood are not the same as his physical body and blood, maintains Ratramnus, so further recourse to God's creative activity isn't necessary.

The Eucharistic debate between Ratramnus and Radbertus, whatever one may think of their views, is much more sophisticated than controversies of the preceding generation. The techniques of philosophy are deployed throughout: argumentation, drawing or rejecting distinctions, attempts to define issues on an abstract level, use of examples and counterexamples, drawing out consequences of positions—all these and more are part of their debate.

Ratramnus later wrote a treatise *On the Soul* as part of another theo-

logical controversy, this time on the nature of the soul; he spends most of the treatise analyzing the relation between the individual soul and the kind of thing it is, the species, given that an individual really ‘is’ its species. Ratramnus argues that genera and species are strictly speaking mental abstractions, not real items in the world, and therefore do not threaten the individuality of different souls. Although he does not develop his view in any detail, it’s clear Ratramnus has the metaphysical problem of universals in mind, introduced by speculation on the nature of the soul.

By the end of ninth century, then, philosophical issues were being explored in connection with dogmatic theology. Much of the tenth century was devoted to assimilating philosophical material for its own sake. The scholars of the tenth century were aided by the efforts of Remigius of Auxerre (*ca.* 841–908) who, at the end of the ninth century, produced glosses or commentaries on the scattered remnants of classical learning: Donatus, Priscian, Boethius, Martianus Cappella. To these were added the ‘old logic’ and Boethius’s monographs. This work, largely anonymous, had its flower at the close of the first millenium: Abbo of Fleury (945?–1004) wrote his own explanation of categorical and hypothetical syllogisms, the *Enodatio*; Notker Labeo (*ca.* 950–1022), a monk at St. Gall, translated several logical works into Old High German and wrote a treatise in Latin on the syllogism.

A measure of how far such purely philosophical interests had spread may be seen in Gerbert (*ca.* 955–1003), *a.k.a.* Pope Sylvester II, who wrote a treatise *On the Rational and the Use of Reason*. He begins with a problem drawn from Porphyry, who says that a differentia can be predicated of its cognate difference, as ‘using reason’ is predicated of what is rational; but how can this be, given that only some of those who are capable of using reason may actually be using it? Gerbert eventually concludes that this predication is indefinite, and hence logically equivalent to the claim that some people able to reason are actually doing so. His journey to this conclusion takes him through an original analysis of potency and act, inspired by a few sketchy remarks in Boethius; he manages to reconstruct a fair amount of Aristotle’s doctrine with little help. But perhaps more impressive is that Gerbert takes up a purely philosophical question and treats it on its merits, a sign that philosophical research had come into its own.

Philosophy had, in fact, become enough of a specific intellectual activity to be seen by some as problematic. A controversy broke out in the first half of the eleventh century over the proper role of philosophy, namely whether it could illuminate doctrinal questions (the view held by the ‘dialecticians’) or was a hindrance rather than a help (the view held by the ‘anti-dialecticians’). Around 1050, Berengar of Tours (*ca.* 999–1088) challenged the traditional

view that in the Eucharist the bread and wine are changed at all, roughly on the grounds that he could not sense any difference before and after their consecration. Lanfranc of Bec (*ca.* 1005–1089) charges in his reply that Berengar has left behind authority and “taken refuge in dialectic,” and, although he would prefer to refute Berengar by citing authoritative works, he too must therefore take up the cudgels of dialectic to defend the doctrine of Christ’s real presence in the host. Berengar retorted that taking ‘refuge’ in dialectic is simply to use reason, a divine gift to man, which cannot go against God but rather confutes His enemies.

The same conflict arose in a different context. PETER DAMIAN (1007–1072), in a letter on divine omnipotence, took up the question whether God could change the past. Some philosophers argued that God could not, on the grounds that it is logically impossible; what has happened is now fixed and unchangeable—in a word, necessary—but it is no restriction or limitation on God’s power to say that he cannot do the impossible. Damian objects that God was able to make things now past turn out otherwise than they did, and, since God is outside of time and eternal, He still has the power to make that event turn out otherwise, even if it is now past to us (and hence unchangeable by us). Damian further objects that the necessity of the past is only a necessity relative to us, or, more precisely, to our discourse; dialectic only draws connections among statements, not things, and so is intrinsically limited in revealing the truth. Worse yet, the partisans of dialectic “discard the foundation of a clear faith because of the obscure darkneses of their arguments.” Damian countenances only a subordinate role for philosophy. In a simile that was to become famous, Damian asserted that philosophy should be related to Scripture “like a handmaiden to her mistress.”

No resolution to the conflict between dialecticians and anti-dialecticians was reached in the first half of the eleventh century, and this set the stage for the different paths followed in the second half of the century by Anselm and Abelard. The sophisticated appropriation of ancient philosophical literature likewise prepared the ground, so that even critics of philosophy were relatively skilled in dialectic compared to their predecessors. There are more detailed and penetrating glosses on works of grammar, logic, and rhetoric drawn up in this period too, most anonymous. By the latter part of the eleventh century Anselm and Abelard could flourish in an intellectual world in which there was widespread familiarity with the best of the ancient philosophical literature available.