

Practical Philosophy: Journal of the Society for Philosophy in Practice

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PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

Volume 6, No. 2

Autumn 2003

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY



FOR PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

Frontiers of Philosophy in Practice

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Book Reviews

Edited Trevor Curnow

Practical Philosophy Autumn 2003, Volume 6, No. 2, Pages 84

Jorge J. E. Garcia and Timothy B. Noone (eds)
A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages
Oxford: Blackwell, 2003 pp. xxi + 739
ISBN: 0631216723 (hb), £85.

This is a wonderful book which provides an excellent introduction to medieval philosophy, a much neglected area. Often dismissed as uninteresting or irrelevant, the thousand years of philosophy contained here constitute a vital part of our intellectual heritage. For those who think that for centuries philosophers cared for little except how many angels could be fitted onto the head of a pin, this book is a serious eye opener. For those who have managed to avoid or overcome such prejudices, it is a valuable work of reference.

The first part, 'The Historical Context' sets out the background to the period in a series of short but informative essays. The second part deals with 138 different authors from Adam of Wodeham to William of Ware. It is not, of course, exhaustive, and the editors acknowledge that, even with the substantial space available to them, they were obliged to omit some philosophers they would have preferred to have included. But it is difficult to quibble with their editorial judgment, and all except the most expert in the field will be impressed by the book's scope rather than disappointed by any of its shortcomings. The great names are here, from Augustine to Aquinas, Maximus to Maimonides, and Saadiah to Siger. Mixed in with them are such lesser figures as the splendidly named Richard Swineshead and Vital du Four.

But apart from the fact that it lasted a long time, why bother with medieval philosophy? Certainly, at least some of the debates in which the authors featured here engaged now seem arcane. (The same might also be said of some of the debates of the presocratics, although their fragments are nonetheless lovingly treasured and studied.) However, the great objection levelled against it is, of course, that it is really only Christian philosophy, and therefore of interest only to theologians. (Although it is questionable whether those who espouse such a line would wish to applaud the Christian theologians who dismissed 'pagan' philosophy on the same basis.) The first point to make about this objection is that it is simply wrong, as the inclusion of Islamic and Jewish philosophers in this book reveals. The second is that even with regard to those thinkers who were devout Christians, the philosophical limitations imposed by their faith did not lead to a tedious conformity, and in some cases they are barely discernible. While Christianity may have determined the context, that is by no means the same as dictating the content.

Some of the metaphysical concerns of the period will probably be of interest to relatively few, but there was much more besides, with important work being done in such areas as logic, ethics and epistemology. The contribution of Peter Abelard to the history of moral philosophy, for example, was of considerable significance, although it remains surprisingly little known. And there was much more to William of Ockham than just his famous 'razor'. Philosophical development did not stop with Plotinus and start again with Descartes. Indeed, Descartes himself becomes much more understandable when seen against the background of those who preceded him.

The book presents a fascinating mixture of the famous and the obscure, and affords the reader a series of instructive glimpses into a millennium's thought through the eyes of an impressive array of contributors. I cannot recommend it too highly.

Trevor Curnow