



Scholastic Philosophy in the 13th Century Maurice de Wulf

The thirteenth century marks the culmination of scholasticism. Facing all the problems that confront a complete philosophy, scholasticism gave them *characteristic solutions*, all harmonized into one grand and imposing synthesis. Its great, leading principles were accepted by all scholastics. “No one has ever seriously denied that there was an agreement on fundamentals which authorizes us to regard scholasticism as a system, a school of philosophy.”

At the same time, the *individuality of the scholastics* is very striking. Like all the fertile periods in human thought, the thirteenth century was rich in men of genius. The forms assumed by scholasticism were numerous and noteworthy: each of the great scholastics *realizing in the concrete*, according to the bent of his own peculiar genius, the one dominant *abstract* synthesis. The thirteenth century was likewise the golden age of speculative theology.

Philosophy now addressed itself by preference to *questions in psychology and metaphysics*, the metaphysical point of view predominating. And here too a progressive development is noticeable. The contemporaries of William of Auvergne (in the second and third decades of the thirteenth century) attend mainly to problems about knowledge, the origin and duration of the world, the nature of immaterial substances and of the human soul. With Albert the Great, all the great doctrines of psychology make their appearance; while the exhaustive study of the great problems of metaphysics (as, essence and existence, principle of individuation, matter and form, causes) lead to the gradual exploration of the whole philosophical domain.

Division.

The scholasticism of the thirteenth century contains a large variety of systems, but each of them may be attached to some one of a few groups which followed one another in logical as well as chronological order.

(1) *The older scholasticism of the thirteenth century, embracing the pre-Thomistic systems* — Though the earlier thirteenth-century scholastics assimilated the peripatetic principles embodied in the translations of Aristotle, they still held on to what they had inherited from the preceding period, though much of this was really incompatible with peripateticism: for much of it was of Augustinian and Platonic origin. Then too, they were unable, in the opening decades of the century, to grasp the real sense of all the Aristotelian theories and to appreciate the value and bearing of each upon the entire synthesis of which each formed a part. And, besides, they accepted Neo-Platonic and Arabian accretions, coming from the Spanish commentators, as the authentic teaching of Aristotle. These are some of the causes which account for the *doctrinal incoherences* of the early scholastic systems: incoherences which do not indeed compromise the organic unity of scholasticism, as certain syntheses of the earlier Middle Ages did, but which certainly do *diminish* and loosen its compactness. It is this lack of sure and definite convergence that distinguishes the earlier from the later systems of the thirteenth century: the latter are based more firmly on peripateticism, and by reason of their greater consistency and harmony of parts will always rank as the most characteristic and enduring monuments of the medieval scholastic

genius.

Among the foreign elements found in the earlier scholastic systems, these are the more important: the predominance of the notion of the good as compared with that of the true, and the corresponding primacy of will over intelligence in God and in man the necessity of a direct, illuminating act of God in certain of our intellectual processes; the minimal yet positive actuality of primal matter apart from all “informing” influence of substantial form the presence, in the former, of germinal principles. or *rationes seminales* of things; the hylemorphic composition of spiritual substances; the multiplicity of forms in natural beings, especially in man, and the individuality of the soul independently of its union with the body; the identity of the soul with its faculties, and the “active” character of the soul’s representative processes; the impossibility of creation of the world *ab aeterno*.

This collection of views has been called *Augustinism*, and the group of philosophers who propounded them the *Augustinian wing* of scholasticism (as opposed to the *peripatetic wing*). But this style of description is open to serious objections. In the first place, such a description would be justified only if the one section propounded the doctrine of St. Augustine *alone* and the other that of Aristotle *alone*. But some Augustinian doctrines, such as that of Exemplarism, became part of the common patrimony of all scholasticism, being found in St. Thomas the “peripatetic” no less than in St. Bonaventure the “Augustinian”. Moreover, the groundwork of the teaching which is coloured by the Augustinian influences, is itself peripatetic throughout, as, for example, the teaching about matter and form, about potency and act, etc. And finally, the “peripatetic” Duns Scotus espouses many of these “Augustinian” theories: yet he is never classified among the Augustinians of the thirteenth century. The description is objectionable because, in the second place, “Augustinism” as summarized above, may be really resolved into groups of theories issuing from three or even four distinct sources. Some of them are certainly of Augustinian origin, as, for instance, the identity of the soul and its faculties, the primacy of will over intellect, the substantial independence of the soul in regard to the body, the absence of causal activity in the object of the act of cognition, the theory of the *rationes seminales*. But others of them are in *opposition* to the *genuine* teaching of St. Augustine; they are Neo-Platonic and Arabian distortions of the saint’s real teaching (e.g., the special illumination theory). Others again were propagated by the *parallel but preponderating influence of the peripatetic writings* of the Arabians and Jews: the matter and form theory and its application to immaterial substances, evidently inspired by Avicbron. Then, finally, theories like that of the plurality of forms are entirely *foreign* to Augustinism and come exclusively from Arabian sources. For all those reasons we think that the title of *Augustinism*, usurping as it does the name of a great philosopher and of a distinct and well-known system in the history of philosophy, should give place to some wider designation: *earlier scholasticism of the thirteenth century*, or, *pre-Thomistic systems*.

It is further to be noted that the characteristic elements of these systems are *floating*, and *variable* from one individual scholastic to another; that they are but loosely laid alongside Aristotelian teachings; and that they are understood and expounded with many varying shades of meaning. It would be difficult to draw up a common list of them for all the teachers of the time. Thus Alexander of Hales rejects the theory of the identity of the soul with its faculties; St. Bonaventure adopts it with hesitations and reserves; while others regard it as fundamental. So too, the theory of special illumination is understood in all sorts of ways and rejected by not a few.

We should bear in mind especially that the weakening elements were evacuated by scholasticism as time went on: the great scholastics steadily eliminated all inconsistent and jarring opinions from their teaching. If we compare, for instance, the philosophy of William of Auvergne with that of St. Bonaventure, we shall be struck at once with the superiority of the

latter. We cannot, therefore, put upon the same level the systems of the precursors, the more comprehensive system of Alexander of Hales and the still more fully co-ordinated system of St. Bonaventure. In some of its doctrines, too, the older scholasticism outlived even the triumph of peripateticism.

(2) *The peripateticism of the Albertino-Thomistic School* — As we advance in the thirteenth century and see the censures against Aristotle gradually relax in rigour, there appears, alongside the earlier traditions, a new movement of an avowedly peripatetic tendency. It finds full expression in the philosophy of Albert the Great. But it was St. Thomas who set it forth as a grand and enduring system, while he at the same time dismantled many a theory that had previously loomed large in the schools. Thenceforth the scholastic synthesis appears in all its fulness and power.

(3) *The conflict of Thomism with the earlier scholasticism* — Thomism was bound to come into immediate conflict with the older scholasticism, for it rejected many of the current promiscuous theories, as inconsistent with its own principles. This collision of the old thought with the new, was often animated and sometimes even violent; and it took place in various and unexpected ways. The struggle issued in the formation of three groups: the *irreconcilable opponents* of Thomism, headstrong partisans of the old, received opinions (§ 1); the loyal and *wholehearted supporters* of Thomism (§ 2); and finally a group of more or less moderate, eclectic thinkers, Thomists on some points, adherents of traditional views on others, themselves innovators in not a few (§ 3).

(4) *The peripateticism of Duns Scotus and the Franciscan School* — In the closing years of the thirteenth century, Duns Scotus formulated a system of philosophy on a peripatetic basis, but deviating both from St. Thomas and from the lines of the older scholasticism. These latter lines had been followed by practically the whole Franciscan order down to Scotus's time, but he led the order in a partly new direction.

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