Post Classical Philosophy: Western Europe

Overview

Classical Greco Roman philosophy matured in the fourth century B.C.E. with the rich harvest of thought gathered in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and yet there was much systematic thinking, in the classical world, that followed the achievements of the fourth century. There were the Stoics and Epicureans, the Pythagoreans, and in early years C.E. the Gnostics, who typified the new thirsts for salvation through belief. It was not until Saint Augustine, in the fifth century C.E., that the shape of a post-classical western European philosophy began to emerge. It was a philosophy touched, from the start, by the determination to think in terms of the Christian revelation. Therefore, since that revelation, which made the world look different, had occurred only 'recently,' much realignment of speculative thought was necessary, before a pertinent new philosophy could be formulated. We mention three stages of that reformulation.

Saint Augustine   Still a Roman citizen, still--as he reveals in his Autobiography, *The Confessons (*400 C.E.)--torn between the desires of the flesh and the desires of spirit, this Bishop of Hippo, in North Africa, wrote voluminously of the relationships between man and god, and in particular of the presence of sin, the Fall, in human behavior. He moved out, from this concern with sinfulness, into close examinations of the moral life, the individual's responsibility to community, the devastating counterpressures exercised by the evil in the daily. While he considered himself a man of god, a theologian, his finesse in advancing and critiquing his own points led him into issues of logic, epistemology, and 'mindfulness' which constantly cross the line into what we would today call 'philosophy.'

The formation of a Christian philosophy   Saint Augustine wrote at a time when the harsh consequences of major cultural transformation were starting to be widely felt. The schools and academies of ancient learning, which had been of some but declining influence in the Roman Empire itself, were giving way to the anomalies of economic, social, and cultural decline. Education itself was in peril and the brilliant efforts of an individual, like Augustine, long lay in abeyance, awaiting the consolidation of Christian learning and thought, which was being kept alive, at least in the form of spiritual disciplines, by the monastic sects--Benedictines (founded 529 C.E.) and Franciscans (founded 1209 C.E.) being among the driving forces promoting education, devotional learning, and Biblical thinking. The thinkers central to monastic thought were scornful of 'philosophy,' which was often associated with the 'fallen thought' of Greece and Rome, preferring to think of themselves as 'theologians,' but were in fact philosophers , for in order to explain the relation of God to man they needed theories of the nature of thinking and the mind, arguments pertaining to ethical value and the moral life, and even conceptions of the place of the aesthetic in creation.

Saint Thomas Aquinas and his world   It is far from Saint Benedict, in the sixth century C.E. to the apex of Western Postclassical thinking, in the thirteenth century. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.) , the towering figure of this apex thinking, undertakes in his*Summa Theologiae* (*Essence of Theology*, 1485 C.E.) to synthesize the major themes of Christian life--God, Trinity, Creation, Grace, Sin, Will, Virtue--with precise logical thinking. To launch this synthesis Thomas drew on the slowly accumulated resources of his time: a spiritual climate--this was the age of great Cathedral Building in Europe; the seminal texts of Aristotle which had passed through Byzantine and Muslim translations, in Byzantium, and were being translated back into Latin; and the formative thinking of now earlier Christian philosophers, like John Duns Scotus (815-871 C.E.) and Saint Anselm (1033-1109 C.E).

Readings

Schoedinger, Andrew B., ed*., Oxford Readings in Mediaeval Philosophy*, Oxford, l996.

Lagerlund, Henrik*, Encyclopedia of Mediaeval Philosophy between 500-1500*, Dordrecht, 2011.

Discussion questions

What role did the first western universities play in the development of mediaeval western philosophy?

From Augustine to Saint Thomas Aquinas is a long time. What traces of Augustine's thought and sensibility remain in Saint Thomas' *Summa Theologiae?*

Saint Thomas drew heavily on the thought of Aristotle, whom he called simply 'the philosopher.' What are the main uses Thomas made of Aristotle's thought?