

A HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY, by F. C. Copleston. *Methuen*, 1972. 399 pp. £4.

Fr Copleston is too modest in presenting this book as a 'revision and enlargement' of his small *Medieval Philosophy* published in 1952. For this is entirely a new work; the whole subject has clearly been thought out afresh and the 'enlargement' is both ample and important. Perhaps the best way for me to review it is, first to say how it strikes me as a whole, and then to glance at Fr Copleston's treatment of some of the more important thinkers in the long period that he covers.

Every general account of medieval philosophy tends to fall into roughly the same pattern with parts of sections running somewhat as follows: (1) from the Greek Fathers to Augustine and Boethius and on to Anselm; (2) the twelfth century; (3) Arab and Jewish philosophy; (4) the wave of new translations from Arabic and Greek and the rise of the Universities; (5) the thirteenth century; (6) the fourteenth century. But, of course, this pattern is modulated differently by different historians and an instructive analysis, in this respect, might be made of four distinguished works in English on our subject published in recent years: Gilson's *Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (1955), David Knowles's *Evolution of Medieval Thought* (1962), J. R. Weinberg's *Short History of Medieval Philosophy* (1964), and now Fr Copleston's book. Without going into needless detail, it may be worth noting certain broad differences of attitude and emphasis that emerge, I suggest, from a rapid comparison of the proportionate amount of his space that each of these scholars allots to the sections numbered above. Measured by this yardstick, Gilson and Knowles seem to show more interest in the earlier centuries, covered by sections 1 and 2, than do Weinberg and Copleston; but the differences are not very marked. A sharper contrast appears with section 3: here Weinberg and Copleston are well in the lead, with Knowles far in the rear: only about 3 per cent of his total space is given to the Islamic and Jewish philosophers. They get much more attention from Fr Copleston—particularly Avicenna, whose importance for the Christian West, whether as a positive influence (as on the young Aquinas and on Scotus) or as a major antagonist (as on Ockham), was probably greater in the long run than that of Averroes whose fourteenth century following was to prove philosophically fairly sterile. On section 4 Gilson and Knowles

have more to say, and say it better, than the others. Both, after all, are historians of medieval culture in a sense that is hardly true of Copleston. But Copleston's special quality as an historian of *philosophy* begins to come out distinctly as we pass to scholasticism's 'golden age', the thirteenth century, the age of the great philosophico-theological syntheses. It is a quality that distinguishes him from both Gilson and Knowles, though more sharply from the latter (for the sake of brevity I say no more of Weinberg's very useful work); and it consists, I would say, in a pervasive tone of interested but open-minded, indeed, rather detached and sceptical inquiry. One feels, all through his book, that Copleston's *forte* is his ability for philosophical dialogue. As an historian he reports, of course, positions held in the past, but this reporting has a running accompaniment of interrogation and discussion, carried on from the point of view of a man of the present day (or of men of the present day, for very often the question directed at a given medieval master—say, St Thomas or Ockham—turns out later to imply a point of view which Copleston himself doesn't hold or at least considers one-sided or rather confused). In short, the most striking feature of this 'history' is a persistent discussion of the sense and rational validity of the doctrines it records. And in this interrogation of the great scholastics Copleston, as I have implied, goes beyond even Gilson—who, after all, is a distinguished thinker in his own right—and, of course, far beyond Knowles (which is not to deny that Knowles may be, by and large, a better *historian* than Copleston). For Gilson, of course, certainly asks, 'What does A mean?', and 'How does he prove it?'; but you are not aware in his work, or to nothing like the same degree, of the question that is more or less implicit throughout Copleston's: 'How would A prove this *today*? What would he make of this or that modern objection?'

In a historical work so marked an interrogatory attitude has its dangers. It can give the work an intellectual force and freshness it might otherwise lack; as I am sure it does in the present case, especially in Copleston's later chapters (for this book is one that gets better as it goes on). And it can serve as excellent narrative technique; as when, having reported that A held this or that, you go on in some such terms as these: 'That seems an odd thing to

say . . . but what A seems to have meant is, etc. . . .’ But sometimes the readiness to discuss may be intrusive and get in the way of objective exposition; as I think happens in Copleston’s section on St Thomas, to which I will come presently. And occasionally, too, that readiness seems uncontrolled in another way; as when the question or objection put is rather too obviously inept: in such cases—they are not many—the voice is the voice of a learned Jesuit but the ‘thought’ is a half-educated teenager’s.

Apart from the section on the Arabs and the Jews, I found the first half of the book a good deal less interesting than the second, which begins with two chapters on, respectively, Bonaventure, with his fellow Franciscans, Bacon and Lull, and the Dominicans, Albert and Thomas. On Bonaventure, Fr Copleston agrees with Gilson, against Van Steenberghe, that he ‘is much more Augustinian than Aristotelian’; more surprisingly, that the Christian factors in Bonaventure’s thought gave this, in effect, a unity in ‘the *philosophical area*’ (my italics). This is an interesting judgment, for it combines with later passages in the book—especially in the chapter on Scotus and in a rather surprisingly detailed and appreciative one on Nicholas of Cusa—to suggest that Fr Copleston may have something interesting up his sleeve concerning the old Gilsonian idea of ‘Christian philosophy’. But the theme is not, in this book, developed explicitly. St Thomas gets 20 pages (as much as Ockham) which, as a sketch of Thomism, do something to inform the ignorant; but I found them flat and at times trivial. It is all very well to shoot down idols, but here one is sometimes left wondering who on earth is firing the shots. And sometimes when Fr Copleston intervenes to defend St Thomas he unwittingly makes things worse; as when, warding off a particularly gross swipe at the idea that Thomas was ‘original’, he goes on to say, ‘He was not, however, a striver after originality, in the sense of one who is at all costs intent on saying something new’—which appears to me like saying that someone is not *altogether* a charlatan. And there is a similar clumsiness of expression in the comments (p.

188) on Thomas’s effort to combine a psychology based on Aristotle with belief in personal immortality. But the whole section shows Copleston at less than his best—too much preoccupied, one suspects, by what he calls ‘all the fuss made by Thomists about their hero’. He does himself more justice in an ‘Epilogue’ at the end of the book, where *inter alia* he reconsiders, and now quite seriously, some characteristic Thomist positions.

By contrast, I found the chapter on Duns Scotus absorbing. On this great man I speak as a fool, but now at least as one who thinks he begins to understand why Scotus is a different kind of metaphysician from Aquinas; and how he is a turning point in the history of scholasticism, with his reduction of the range of reason *in divinis* and his initiating that ‘attempt to dehellenize Christian thought’ which Copleston sees as characteristic of the fourteenth century (‘dehellenize . . . in the sense of eliminating elements of necessitarianism derived from Greco-Islamic philosophy’). This anti-Greek and anti-Islamic reaction is evident in Scotus and later in Gerson, but in between it was the pugnacious Englishman who was the chief agent in the ‘growing separation between theology and philosophy’ which marked his century, as it has tended, within the Church, to mark ours during the past thirty years. This similarity gives a special interest to Fr Copleston’s analysis of the ‘crisis’ represented by Ockham; and some of his reflections thereon are exceedingly pertinent. How seriously he takes the fourteenth century may be gauged by the fact that he gives a good quarter of his whole space to it; the proportion in Gilson being about 18 per cent and in Knowles less than 5 per cent. He includes, as is customary, chapters on ‘speculative mysticism’ (chiefly Eckhart, of course) and ‘political philosophy’ (chiefly Marsiglio of Padua). Both are fairly useful, to say the least, apart from the brief section on Dante in the latter one. But the 20-page Epilogue which rounds the book off is more than just useful, it is full of intelligence; a worthy ending to a somewhat uneven but, on the whole, very remarkable work.

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MEDIAEVAL LOGIC AND METAPHYSICS: A Modern Introduction, by D. P. Henry. *Hutchinson University Library*, London, 1972. 133 pp. £2.75.

While sketches of the development of logic in the Middle Ages already exist in the works of Boehner, Bochenski and the Kneales, to replace the earlier and inadequate treatment by

Prantl, nothing like a comprehensive history is possible yet. Minio-Paluello and De Rijk have added to the knowledge of Abelard and the twelfth-century logicians; the thirteenth-