

4-2011

Review of Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background

Sharon M. Kaye

John Carroll University, skaye@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/phil-facpub>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kaye, Sharon M., "Review of Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background" (2011). *Philosophy*. 3.
<http://collected.jcu.edu/phil-facpub/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

rules of counterpoint to have any credibility—although Kraft does shed some welcome light on a previously obscure relationship between the widely disseminated *L'amour de moy* and a Dutch Psalm paraphrase in the *Souterliedekens* of 1540 (pp. 31–32). I also feel puzzled by her lengthy dissection of an article from 1952 in which Gustave Reese and Theodore Karp sought to dispel a long-standing suspicion that the music of both f. fr. 12744 and Bayeux consisted of voices extracted from polyphonic compositions; while Kraft exposes a number of errors in their work, these look to me like the innocent mistakes all but inevitable in an era when scholars had more limited access to original sources, and I do not see that she significantly challenges their essential conclusions.

The confrontation with Reese and Karp appears as one of several items on the CD-ROM that rounds out Kraft's book. These include transcriptions of the songs and of several related polyphonic settings, a number of further side essays, and color reproductions of almost seventy pages from f. fr. 12744 itself. At the risk of sounding churlish, I must regret that the publishers did not include the entire manuscript—or did the library not allow them to do so? Apart from that reservation, however, I must compliment the publishers on an excellent job. The same goes for Kraft: whatever criticisms I may have, she has brought us some significant steps further in understanding a body of music whose value we can now better appreciate.

JOSHUA RIFKIN, Boston University

HENRIK LAGERLUND, ed., *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*. (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters, 103.) Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010. Pp. ix, 234. \$138.
doi:10.1017/S0038713411000406

This volume, which began as a European Science Foundation workshop, is a collection of articles by an international group of scholars. It presents the medieval contribution to skepticism—what can human beings really know?—an enduring question in the history of Western philosophy.

A close examination of such authors as al-Ghazālī, Henry of Ghent, John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Nicholas of Autrecourt, John Buridan, Thomas Aquinas, and Albert of Saxony proves not only that late-medieval philosophers were aware of the problem of human knowledge but that it deeply affected their philosophies in general. Short of producing actual skeptics, medieval skepticism inspired sophisticated theories of knowledge acquisition and reined in excessive metaphysical hypothesizing. Tracing these developments, this volume sets a foundation for future scholars to determine the extent of the medieval influence on Renaissance thinking.

The method of the book is primarily exegetical. The authors translate and explain difficult Latin texts and attempt to correct earlier interpretations of them. Trained in philosophy, almost all the authors make an effort to assess the theories they explain, an effort necessarily condensed because of the weight of the exegesis. “But is Aquinas’ account right?” Gyula Klima asks; “Indeed can it possibly be right? . . . Obviously, at the end of an already lengthy paper, I cannot even properly raise these issues, let alone properly address them . . .” (p. 166).

The title suggests that the purpose of the book is to supply the medieval background heretofore missing from the history of skepticism. That premise is explicitly stated by the editor in his introduction: “For a long time the history of skepticism did not include the Middle Ages” (p. 1). But is that premise true?

The book itself suggests not. This is most clearly seen in the chapter by Claude Panaccio and David Piché, “Ockham’s Reliabilism and the Intuition of Non-existents.” Panac-

cio and Piché write that renowned twentieth-century scholars such as Étienne Gilson and Anton Pegis identified William of Ockham's intuition of non-existent beings as a major source of skepticism in the fourteenth century. They quote Konstanty Michalski, who wrote that "the steady and ill-considered application of this principle in the field of knowledge was bound to engender distrust and [a] skeptical spirit in [the] philosophy of nature as well as in metaphysics and theology" (p. 97). Panaccio and Piché go on to argue that the Michalski-Gilson-Pegis interpretation of Ockham was incorrect. Later twentieth-century scholars such as Marilyn McCord Adams demonstrated that Ockham showed but very small interest in the question of skepticism. Panaccio and Piché aim to build on that correction by showing that the true purpose of Ockham's intuition of non-existent beings was to secure an epistemological position known today as reliabilism.

My point is that, even if the Michalski-Gilson-Pegis interpretation is incorrect, its very existence shows that the history of skepticism has not failed to include the Middle Ages. Perhaps, then, the true purpose of the book is not so much to supply a *missing* history as to help correct a *faulty* history. Thus, in "Al-Ghazālī's Skepticism Revisited" Taneli Kukkonen writes that "it is by now common knowledge" that al-Ghazālī anticipated René Descartes's skeptical arguments (p. 29); Kukkonen's aim here is to situate al-Ghazālī's arguments for further understanding.

While the papers in this volume are very well researched, I think it is crucial to acknowledge the reason behind the somewhat mixed-up state of scholarship concerning the existence of skepticism in the Middle Ages. Medieval philosophers could explore skepticism only in very indirect ways because of the limitations on philosophical inquiry that existed in the period. Since philosophy was seen as subordinate to theology, skepticism *per se* was not allowed. Even a limited epistemological skepticism concerning our knowledge of the world (not of God) was suspect, and that is why the skepticism that is present in medieval sources is so difficult to interpret. Some discussion of the framework in which all of the Christian thinkers discussed here worked should have been given. Yet, in spite of that flaw, and in spite of the poor copyediting provided by the publisher, this book remains important because of the importance of skepticism itself in the history of Western philosophy.

SHARON M. KAYE, John Carroll University

LLOYD LAING, *European Influence on Celtic Art: Patrons and Artists*. Dublin and Portland, Oreg.: Four Courts Press, 2010. Pp. 247; many black-and-white figures. \$70.
doi:10.1017/S0038713411000418

This book sets out to trace the importance of art and ideas from mainland Europe in shaping Celtic art in the British Isles. Citing a long-standing tendency to discuss Celtic art as a "pure" art, unsullied by outside influences, Laing highlights the many "Celtic" motifs that can also be found in the arts of the Roman Empire and later Christian cultures. As such, it is a very useful demonstration of the need to consider the art of any culture in a regional and even global context.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first consists of a short, but very useful, methodological discussion of the study of Celtic art, providing the historiographic background for the field, a consideration of the available sources of evidence, and a thumbnail history of the Celts. The second, third, and fourth chapters discuss the pre-Christian (fifth century B.C.E. to fifth century C.E.), early Christian (fifth to seventh centuries), and "mature" (seventh to thirteenth centuries) periods of Celtic art. These chapters are thick with images and information, corraling a considerable array of primary sources and mod-