

History of Philosophy

22 Early Medieval Philosophy

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Abstract:

These excerpts from Dr. Arthur Holmes' lectures provide an overview of **early medieval philosophy**, focusing on the pervasive influence of **Platonic and Aristotelian thought** across Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. The text highlights how early thinkers like **Pseudo-Dionysius** and **John Scotus Eriugena** utilized Neoplatonic frameworks to explore the nature of God and the process of emanation. **Saint Anselm of Canterbury** is featured for his development of the **ontological argument**, a system-dependent proof for God's existence rooted in Augustinian metaphysics. The sources also contrast these views with the Aristotelian contributions of figures such as **Boethius, Maimonides, and Averroes**, particularly regarding the relationship between **faith and reason**. Furthermore, the material explores the "two-fold truth" doctrine and **Bonaventure's** subsequent rejection of Aristotelianism in favor of a modified Platonic tradition to defend individual immortality. Ultimately, these lectures frame the early medieval period as a critical preparatory era that defined the philosophical problems later addressed by **Thomas Aquinas**.

Briefing Document:

Early Medieval Philosophy: A Synthesis of Theistic Faith and Classical Traditions

Executive Summary

The early medieval period (approximately 500 AD to 1000 AD) serves as the foundational era for Western philosophical development, characterized by the intense synthesis of classical Platonic and Aristotelian thought with the three major theistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This period was primarily

preparatory, defining the philosophical problems—such as the relationship between faith and reason, the nature of universals, and the mechanics of creation—that would be constructively treated by later thinkers like Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

Critical Takeaways:

- **Theistic Commonality:** Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers faced nearly identical problems due to their shared belief in a personal, transcendent creator God.
- **Platonic Dominance:** Early medieval thought was heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, specifically regarding hierarchies of being and theories of emanation.
- **The Faith-Reason Dialectic:** The era established varying models for relating religious dogma to rational inquiry, ranging from "faith seeking understanding" to the "twofold truth" doctrine.
- **Ontological Foundations:** St. Anselm's ontological argument represents a pinnacle of system-dependent reasoning within the Augustinian-Platonic framework.

I. Foundations of Early Medieval Thought

Early medieval philosophy is defined by two major generalizations regarding its scope and lasting contribution.

1. Cross-Cultural Philosophical Problems

Platonic and Aristotelian influences pervaded all three major theistic religions. Because these faiths share a belief in a personal transcendent creator, they grappled with the same philosophical tensions:

- The relationship between **time and eternity**.
- The tension between **God and creation**.
- The placement of the **theory of universals (forms)** within a theistic framework.
- The potential conflicts between **religious faith and philosophical reason**.

2. Preparatory Function

The main contribution of this period (up to 1000 AD) was defining and exploring these issues rather than providing final resolutions. This era set the stage for the more "concentrated and constructive" treatments found in the late Middle Ages by figures such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

II. The Platonic and Neoplatonic Tradition

Neoplatonism was so deeply integrated into early medieval thought that distinguishing it from religious doctrine is often difficult. The central tension remained the distinction between **emanation** (creation flowing from the divine being) and **creation ex nihilo** (creation out of nothing).

Key Figures and Concepts

Figure	Contribution / Philosophical Stance
Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500 AD)	Proposed a hierarchy of beings emanating from "the One." Established the "positive" and "negative" ways (<i>via negativa</i>) of speaking about God. Influenced later mystics like Meister Eckhart.
John Scotus Eriugena (d. 877 AD)	Developed a four-fold categorization of reality based on the logic of the "excluded middle": Uncreated Creator (God as source), Created Creator (the Logos/Forms), Created Non-creator (particulars), and Uncreated Non-creator (God as final cause).
St. Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1000 AD)	An Augustinian Platonist who viewed philosophy as an activity of religious praise. He replaced emanation with a hierarchy of being/goodness based on creation.

St. Anselm's Ontological Argument

Anselm is best known for his a priori argument for the existence of God, which is entirely system-dependent upon his metaphysical framework:

1. **The Definition:** God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived."

2. **The Logic:** If this being exists only in the understanding, it is not the greatest, because existing in reality is "greater" than existing only in the mind.
3. **The Conclusion:** To avoid self-contradiction, the idea of a perfect being must necessarily include the perfection of existence.

Criticism and Defense:

- **Gaunilo's Objection:** A monk named Gaunilo argued that one could conceive of a "perfect island," but that does not prove its existence.
- **Anselm's Rebuttal:** Anselm argued a perfect island is a finite, limited being; the argument only applies to the unique, necessary being of God.

III. The Aristotelian Influence

While Platonism dominated the early period, Aristotelianism was preserved and interpreted through Christian, Jewish, and Muslim lenses, often leading to significant theological friction.

- **Boethius (Christian):** A translator of Aristotle whose work *The Consolation of Philosophy* survived from antiquity. His most significant contribution was formulating the "problem of universals."
- **Maimonides (Jewish):** Author of *A Guide for the Perplexed*, he attempted to reconcile Jewish faith with Aristotelian philosophy, much as Philo of Alexandria had done with Plato.
- **Averroes (Muslim):** The most influential Aristotelian commentator. He proposed a hierarchy of 100 intermediary intelligences between God (pure actuality) and prime matter (pure potentiality).

The Averroistic Challenge

Averroes identified two major conflicts between Aristotle and theistic faith:

1. **The Eternity of Matter:** Aristotle's view suggested matter is eternal, contradicting creation *ex nihilo*.
2. **Denial of Individual Immortality:** Averroes argued that at death, the human soul is absorbed into a cosmic rational soul, losing individual identity.

IV. The Problem of Faith and Reason

The relationship between religious belief and rational inquiry emerged as a central theme, resulting in three distinct traditions.

1. Faith Seeking Understanding (*Credo ut intelligam*)

Originating with St. Augustine and championed by St. Anselm, this view holds that philosophy is not a neutral activity. Instead, it is a religious undertaking where the believer starts with faith and uses reason to explore the implications of that faith. As Augustine stated: "Understanding is faith's reward."

2. The Twofold Truth

Proposed by Averroes and later adopted by "Latin Averroists" like Seeger of Brabant, this doctrine suggests:

- **Theological Truth:** Expressed through imagery and allegory for the uneducated.
- **Philosophical Truth:** Expressed with precision through logic.
- In cases of tension, philosophy is often viewed as the more precise way of stating the truth.

3. The Bonaventure Reaction

St. Bonaventure (13th Century) rejected Aristotelianism in favor of the Platonic tradition. He argued that:

- Without the **Divine Illumination** of the Logos, Aristotle could not know the full truth.
- God knows **individuals** because the "Forms" in God's mind are not just species, but the exemplars of all possible individual qualities.
- This allowed Bonaventure to defend **individual immortality** and God as an efficient cause (Creator) rather than just a final cause.

V. Conclusion: Metaphysical Frameworks

The philosophical debates of the early Middle Ages demonstrate that arguments are rarely neutral; they are **system-dependent**. For medieval thinkers, existence was a "transcendental quality" involving unity, truth, and goodness. This stands in contrast to modern (Kantian) views where existence is a value-neutral predicate. Therefore, the validity of early medieval arguments—such as Anselm's—often depends on whether one accepts their underlying metaphysical framework: a rational reality structured by a rational Creator.

Study Guide:

A Comprehensive Study Guide to Early Medieval Philosophy

This study guide provides a detailed review of early medieval philosophy, focusing on the synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian traditions within Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thought. It examines the key figures, central arguments, and the evolving relationship between faith and reason up to approximately 1000 AD.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer each of the following questions in two to three sentences based on the source context.

1. What common philosophical challenges were shared by the three major theistic religions during the early medieval period?
2. What is the fundamental distinction between the Neoplatonic theory of emanation and the concept of *creation ex nihilo*?
3. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, how can the "positive" and "negative" ways be used to speak about God?
4. How does John Scotus Eriugena apply the law of the excluded middle to his designations of God and creation?

5. What is the core premise of Saint Anselm's Ontological Argument?
6. Explain the objection raised by Gaunilo "the Fool" and why Anselm considered it irrelevant.
7. What does it mean for a philosophical argument to be "system-dependent"?
8. How did Averroes reconcile the tensions between Aristotelian philosophy and religious faith?
9. Why did Averroes conclude that there is no individual immortality?
10. How did Bonaventure use the concept of "forms" to defend the possibility of individual immortality?

Part II: Quiz Answer Key

Question Answer

- 1 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophies all faced the problem of explaining the relationship between a personal transcendent creator and his creation. They specifically struggled with the relationship between time and eternity, the role of universal forms, and whether faith and philosophy are in conflict.
- 2 Emanation suggests that creation flows or radiates directly from the very being of the divine, maintaining a hierarchy of being. In contrast, *creation ex nihilo* posits that God brought the universe into existence out of nothing, rather than from his own substance.
- 3 The positive way allows for speaking of God because creatures bear a resemblance to the "One" as they ascend the hierarchy of being. The negative way is necessary because God's nature is so vastly different in degree from lower beings that it is more accurate to say what God is not.
- 4 Eriugena uses the logic that anything spoken of must be either a creator or non-creator and either created or uncreated. This results in four categories: the uncreated creator (God as source), the created creator

(the Logos/forms), the created non-creator (particulars), and the uncreated non-creator (God as final cause).

5 Anselm argues that we possess an idea of a perfect being "than which nothing greater can be conceived." He asserts that if such a being existed only in the understanding, it would not be perfect; therefore, existence is a necessary perfection that must belong to this being in reality.

6 Gaunilo argued that imagining a "perfect island" does not make it exist. Anselm responded that the argument only applies to a "perfect being" with all perfections, whereas an island is a finite, limited thing that does not inherently possess the perfection of necessary existence.

7 A system-dependent argument is one that relies on a specific metaphysical framework or set of presuppositions to be valid. For example, Anselm's argument depends on a Platonic hierarchy where existence is viewed as a "perfection" or a degree of goodness.

8 Averroes developed the "two-fold truth," distinguishing between truths of faith and truths of reason. He suggested that religion uses allegories and imagery for the uneducated, while philosophy provides precise truth through logical demonstration.

9 Averroes believed that at death, the individual human soul is united with a cosmic rational soul. Because he saw the soul as part of a collective rational process, he rejected the notion of individual, personal immortality.

10 Bonaventure argued that individuals embody not just the form of their species, but a unique combination of all qualities known by God. He posited that because humans consist of matter and a rational soul united by a common material basis, the rational soul can survive the death of the body.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: The following questions are designed for more in-depth reflection and analysis. No answers are provided; use the source context to build your arguments.

1. **The Synthesis of Traditions:** Analyze how early medieval philosophy served as a "preparatory" period for later thinkers like Aquinas and Bonaventure. How did the blending of Platonic and Aristotelian thought with theistic religion set the stage for later medieval debates?
2. **The Concept of Emanation vs. Creation:** Compare and contrast the Neoplatonic emanation models of Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena with the traditional Christian view of *creation ex nihilo*. What are the theological and philosophical implications of each model?
3. **The Ontological Debate:** Evaluate the Ontological Argument as presented by Anselm and the critiques offered by Gaunilo and Kant. Focus specifically on whether existence can be considered a "predicate" or "perfection" and how this depends on one's metaphysical framework.
4. **Faith and Reason:** Discuss the different approaches to the relationship between faith and reason. Contrast Augustine's "faith seeking understanding" (*credo ut intelligam*) with Averroes' "two-fold truth" and Siger of Brabant's Latin Averroism.
5. **The Defense of the Individual:** Examine Bonaventure's rejection of Aristotelianism. How did his theories on divine illumination and the forms of individuals attempt to solve the problems of God's knowledge and individual immortality that he perceived in Aristotle's work?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Archetypes/Exemplars:** The forms or patterns in the mind of God (the Logos) according to which the world of particular things is fashioned.
- **Created Creator:** John Scotus Eriugena's term for the Logos or the world of forms; it is created by the One but acts as the pattern for all other things.
- **Credo ut Intelligam:** "I believe in order that I may understand"; the Augustinian principle that faith provides the necessary perspective and motivation for rational inquiry.

- **Divine Illumination:** The Platonic/Augustinian concept that the human mind requires the light of the Logos to truly understand the truth.
- **Emanation:** The Neoplatonic theory that all reality flows out from the divine substance in a hierarchy of decreasing unity and goodness.
- **Epistrophe:** The Neoplatonic concept of the return of all things from the many back to the One.
- **Latin Averroism:** A movement in Western Christendom, exemplified by Siger of Brabant, that adopted Averroes' doctrine of two-fold truth and his interpretations of Aristotle.
- **Logos:** In the Neoplatonic and early medieval context, the unity of all forms or archetypes, often identified with the second person of the Trinity or a primary emanation.
- **Ontological Argument:** A rational argument for the existence of God based solely on the definition or concept of God as a perfect being.
- **Privation:** The absence or lack of a good that should be present; used by Augustine and Anselm to explain the nature of evil.
- **Pseudo-Dionysius:** A 6th-century Neoplatonic philosopher (Dionysius the Areopagite) who established a mystic path and a hierarchy of beings that influenced medieval thought.
- **System-Dependent:** An argument that is only valid within the context of a specific set of metaphysical or logical presuppositions.
- **Two-Fold Truth:** The idea that there are distinct realms of truth for religion (allegorical/imaginative) and philosophy (logical/precise), which may appear to conflict.
- **Uncreated Creator:** Eriugena's designation for God as the ultimate source of all things.
- **Via Negativa (Way of Negation):** A method of describing God by stating what He is not, emphasizing the vast difference between the divine nature and finite creatures.