

Medieval Philosophy Redefined

The development of cenoscopic science, AD354–1644

Up to now, “medieval philosophy” has suffered from the absence of any positive definition which would give coherence to the period as a whole. The positive terms for a redefining of medieval thought, as accomplished in this book, result from developing the neglected but intertwined consequences of two simple facts. The first is the fact, generally recognized, that from its beginning in the lifetime of Augustine to its demise in the lifetime of Galileo, Poincaré, and Descartes (when transition was made to our national languages), intellectual life was communicated principally in the Latin language. The second is the fact, unnoticed by the principal historians of philosophy (and medieval philosophy in particular from the late 19th to the end of the 20th century), that the general notion of *sign* as a reality upon the action of which depends the whole of human knowledge, including science in the modern sense, was an original initiative of Latin thought — an idea without counterpart in the ancient Greek period of philosophy’s first development.

The general notion of sign, in fact, was first introduced into human thought in a thematic way by Augustine of Hippo, coincidentally the first major thinker to write exclusively in Latin ignorant of Greek. After Augustine, his notion of sign everywhere pervaded the culture of Latin thought; but only after the 12th century advent of Aristotle did thinkers begin, in the lifetime of Thomas Aquinas, to focus on inquiry into and development of this notion of the being and action of signs as the constant underlay in the development of human thought. Once begun, however, this investigation led to a growing realization that the action of signs (“semiosis”, as it came to be called in postmodern intellectual culture) lay behind and within the development of *nature itself*. Semiosis proves to be an “influence of the future”, transforming environmental conditions gradually, indeed, but dramatically enough that, over time, from an originally lifeless universe, life and eventually human life could emerge and develop.

These two facts taken together — the general notion of sign as the original initiative of Latin thought, and the use of the Latin language as the principal instrument for the development of speculative (i.e., species-specifically human) thought — allow us for the first time to see the “medieval period” as a positively unified whole. This period forms truly and integrally the *middle ages*, the whole span *between* the **end** of ancient philosophy in the Greek language and the **beginning** of modern philosophy and science in the national languages.

The Latin Age, in showing by its closing century how semiosis provides the framework for the *whole* of human knowledge as a critically controlled objectivity, had established the foundation and the

framework which Charles Sanders Peirce would resume with his notion of “semiotics” to name the knowledge acquired by the study of semiosis. Peirce, in turn, by picking up the discussion practically at the very point to which the Latins of Poinsett’s day had advanced it, overcame the limits of modern “epistemology”. He did so by restoring, through the Latin understanding of sign in general, the ancient and medieval notion of *things knowable in themselves* as the basis of science — but “science” now conceived comprehensively to include *both* science in the modern sense (which Peirce called *ideoscopy*) *and* at the same time “science” in the medieval (and ancient Aristotelian) sense that modern science *presupposes* for its own intellectual justification (which Peirce called *cenoscopic science*).

Viewed in these terms, the Latin Age, the “middle” period between ancient and modern thought, comes to be seen as the maturation of cenoscopic science in the emergence of semiotics. This maturation made inevitable the turn toward ideoscopy that positively defined modernity. But just as importantly, the medieval maturation, lost along the Way of Ideas pioneered by Descartes and systematized by Kant, presaged *postmodernity* — an age of intellectual culture marked positively by two realizations: first, that the Enlightenment view of ideoscopy as the whole of science is unsustainable; second, that the modern “analytic” view of philosophy as a linguistic investigation quite separable from history is a myopia.

Postmodernity in this sense, restoring to philosophy its proper historicity and revealing its scientific character as cenoscopy (at once distinguished from and presupposed to modern science as ideoscopy), has the positive sense of revealing the asymptotic but nonetheless actual character of human thought as a coming to terms with “the way things are”, a coming-to-terms which proves more and more essential to the achievement of human flourishing in an evolutionary universe. The role of the Latin Age in making possible this positive sense of “postmodernity” is the story of this book.