

Book notes

EDITED BY MARTIN STONE

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Kurt Flasch *Nicolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung*.
(Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998). Pp. 679 + ii. DM 118 (Hbk).
ISBN 3 465 02704 3.

This erudite and timely book presents a detailed yet synoptic assessment of the work of Nicholas Cusanus (Nicolas Krebs, 1401–1464). Cusanus was an important figure in late medieval philosophy, not least for the reason that his work provides a window on so many themes and issues that dominated philosophical thought in the fifteenth century. The author of influential works such as *De docta ignorantia* (1440) and *De coniecturis* (1440), Cusanus was of the view that reason could not demonstrate the fundamental propositions of scholastic theology. This belief was based on his idea that the soul in a state of ecstasy has the power to transcend all finite limitations. In the love of God, he thought, human beings become one with God, where ‘God’ is defined as a unity without otherness. Such a view, which is indebted to medieval Neoplatonism as well as to the Albertist school associated with Heimericus de Campo (d. 1460), helps to set apart Nicholas from many of his contemporaries. His work provides a clear statement of the apophatic tradition in late medieval theology. Perhaps the greatest virtue of Flasch’s careful study is its ability to make Nicholas’s ideas tractable by the standards of common scholastic discourse. Not only does he reveal and analyse the many influences at work in Cusanus’ thought, but he brings out the depth and relevance of Cusanus’ philosophical ideas. Flasch – a very well known scholar of medieval philosophy – is undaunted by the opaque nature of so many of Nicholas’s theories, and manages to relate their dialectical structure and theological appeal in clear and unpretentious prose. His book repays serious study and will be indispensable reading for those with an interest in Cusanus’ original, yet highly individual, ideas about God and human knowledge.

[M.W.F.S]

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Steven Nadler (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Pp. 319 + xi. £15.00 (Pbk).
ISBN 0 521 62729 X.

The French Oratorian thinker Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) was one of the most important figures in early modern philosophy. A bold yet heterodox thinker, he attempted to construct a synthesis out of Cartesian philosophy with the Neoplatonism of St Augustine.

Malebranche is perhaps best known to students of philosophy as a champion of occasionalism. Given the profound philosophical and theological difficulties that attend this position, it is unsurprising that Malebranche's posthumous reputation suffered as a result of his support for occasionalism. More recently, however, Malebranche has come to command a higher standing among historians of philosophy (particularly in English-speaking countries), and the present collection stands as good evidence of this welcome development. Nadler's *Companion* brings together eleven essays that aim to address Malebranche's thought comprehensively and systematically. Written by acknowledged experts, the essays treat Malebranche's metaphysics, his doctrine of the soul, epistemology, his celebrated debate on ideas with Arnauld, his method, his occasionalism and theory of causality, his philosophical theology, theory of freedom, ethics, and intellectual legacy. Readers of this journal will find the essays by Nicholas Jolley, 'Malebranche on the soul'; Tad Schmaltz, 'Malebranche on ideas and the vision of God'; Donald Rutherford, 'Malebranche's theodicy'; Elmar Krieger, 'Malebranche on human freedom'; and Patrick Riley, 'Malebranche's moral philosophy: divine and human justice', of particular interest. As such, Nadler's volume is the most authoritative guide to Malebranche that exists in English. It also contains a detailed bibliography. It will appeal to students as a convenient and accessible introduction to Malebranche's thought, and to specialists as a conspectus of recent developments in this field of scholarship. The volume is attractively bound and priced by Cambridge University Press. All scholars of early modern philosophy will welcome its appearance.

[M.W.F.S]

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Roger Arnaldez *Averroès: A Rationalist in Islam*. (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). Pp. 15. £20.00 (Hbk). ISBN 0 268 02008 6.

This volume is an English translation of Arnaldez' successful *Averroès un rationaliste en Islam* (Paris: Balland, 1998). The book offers a pithy, yet highly personal, introduction to the work of the great Islamic thinker Averroes (ibn Rushd) (1126–1198). In four short chapters, prefaced by a biographical introduction and completed by a lengthy conclusion, Arnaldez puts before the reader Averroes' main contributions to jurisprudence, medicine, Aristotelian exegesis, philosophy, and theology. For Arnaldez, these disparate strands of Averroes' thought are unified by his 'rationalism'; that is, his singled-minded attempt to submit every aspect of human learning and supernatural speculation to the tribunal of reason. Thus we are told that for Averroes, 'if there is revealed religious truth, it necessarily is in complete accord with rational truth' (3). This approach to Averroes' work tends to emphasize his commitment to philosophy at the expense of any real interest in revealed religion. Thus, what tends to emerge is a picture of Averroes which depicts him as something like a modern-day, secular intellectual, busily combating the perceived inadequacies of an intellectually coercive and suffocating religious system. This view of Averroes, so reminiscent of the infamous thesis advanced by E. Renan in the nineteenth century, is often trotted out today by many Western intellectuals, who look for some figure in the Islamic tradition to counter the likes of Kohemi and the Taliban, to whom they are implacably opposed (cf. the quotation from Salman Rushdie that prefates the volume). Few would deny that Averroes did use dissimulation in his treatment of a number of religious doctrines, and fewer still would deny that Averroes was first and foremost a 'philosopher', as that term was understood within the medieval Arabic tradition. That said, the extent of Averroes' religious convictions are often hard to quantify, and any sweeping conclusion such as that proposed by Arnaldez does not always sit easily with

the available evidence. Yet for all its suggestive conclusions, Arnaldez' book provides a lively and entertaining introduction to Averroes. The book is translated quite capably by David Streight and is well produced by Notre Dame University Press. It is most regrettable, however, that the publishers have adorned the book with a rather clichéd cover. Why must so many books on Islamic philosophy look as if they are editions of the *Arabian Nights* destined for a Victorian nursery?

[M.W.F.S]

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Frederick E. Crowe *Three Thomist Studies*. (Boston MA: Lonergan Institute, 2000). Pp. 260 + xiv. \$14.00 (Pbk). ISBN 0 9700862 0 2.

This volume collects together three studies by the North-American Neo-Thomist philosopher, Frederick Crowe SJ. The first essay concerns the subject of universal norms and concrete *operabile* in Thomas. There, Crowe aims to contribute to many debates in ethics by arguing that universal moral norms are, at best, general guidelines: every concrete moral choice is unique, since it is made in the context of circumstances that are variable, and thus incapable of being brought under finite principles. Hence, universal norms never conclusively establish which concrete moral choices are the 'right ones'. The second study concerns Thomas's account of love and its appropriate analysis. Crowe argues for a more nuanced reading of Thomas's distinction between the types of love, and is eager to point out their contemporary relevance. In his final essay, Crowe addresses epistemology, and in particular the 'proper object of human knowing'. Heavily indebted to the earlier work of Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984), and in particular his interpretation of Thomas in *Insight*, Crowe sets about examining the concept of the unification of experience by means of an assessment of our cognitive abilities. In these times, when most English-speaking philosophers address the work of Thomas from the perspective of contemporary 'analytic philosophy', it is good to be reminded that until very recently there existed a robust tradition of Neo-Thomist philosophy in certain quarters of the American academy. While many of Crowe's methods and arguments will be unfamiliar, and even unconvincing, to a new generation of English-speaking students of Thomas, there is still much to be learned from his careful exegesis and wide knowledge of the primary texts. Those who approach this volume with an open mind will learn a great deal. The volume is well produced and reasonably priced.

[M.W.F.S]

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Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine *Maimonides and the Sciences*. (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, 21). (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000). Pp. 272 + xv. NLG 210.00, \$108.00, £65.00 (Hbk). ISBN 0 7923 6053 2.

In this book eleven leading scholars contribute to our understanding of the scientific and philosophical works of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). Deeply learned in subjects we would now refer to as mathematics, astronomy, astrology (which he strongly rejected), logic, philosophy,

psychology, linguistics, and jurisprudence, and himself a practising physician, Maimonides flourished within the high Arabic culture of the twelfth century. During this time, he had enormous influence upon subsequent Jewish belief and behaviour, not only upon its understanding of certain ethical demands, but also on existing conceptions of ritual tradition. For Maimonides, mastery of the sciences was indispensable to the processes of religious understanding. Most aspects of Maimonides' encyclopaedic knowledge and excellence in learning are on display in this volume. Readers of *Religious Studies* will find the articles by Moshe Idel, 'Deus sive Natura – The metamorphosis of a dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza', and Joseph Agassi, 'Maimonides in context' of particular interest. One also learns a great deal about Maimonides' use of Aristotelian logic and his rejection of astrology in the intelligent essays by Alexander Altmann and Y. Tzvi Langermann. The volume is well bound and displays a very high standard of copy editing. It will be welcomed by students of medieval Jewish philosophy.

[M.W.F.S]