

# Medieval Philosophers and Their Writing: Powerful Tools to Save Society in Turbulent Times

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As medieval works of literature and philosophy are studied in ways that were never possible before, and new archeological findings shedding new light on the true conditions of medieval Europe, many of the ideas that were once held to be true are now being debunked. The use of advanced metal detectors, hyperspectral sensors on drones, and also ground penetrating radar have unearthed new artifacts, buried structures, statues, and even manuscripts. We see, now more than ever, that philosophy was the knife that cut both ways, and it both reinforced and destabilized authority. As such, they were powerful tools that saved society and institutions in turbulent times. Ironically, the philosophers who paid the ultimate price for their ideas were often the ones whose ideas created the strongest, firmest foundation for personal faith and societies' institutions. Such a life was not without risk, however.

For example, although it was always known that being a philosopher during the Medieval Period could be a risky proposition, we now know it was even more dangerous, based on the extreme lengths certain nuns went to hide potentially heretical manuscripts such as those of Julian of Norwich. If your philosophy aligned clearly with Christianity doctrine that suggested the divine rights of kings, a very rigid and incontrovertible hierarchy, a fiery inferno for unbelievers and malefactors, and a heaven that was both a final reward and transcendent unity, you had a good chance of keeping your head (and skin uncharred).

But, if you dared suggest that people could think for themselves, that scripture and teachings should be taught in the vernacular, and that the Church's hierarchies invented by men, not by God, you were in imminent danger of a dungeon, a public beheading, or an even more public burning at the stake. The safest place to practice philosophy was from a monastery or a church, but it was also often the most dangerous, because philosophy was the same as religion, which was the same as politics. Literature and philosophy are both tools for daily personal emotional survival and for profound societal change.

## **Philosophy as a tool for daily personal living, and a tool for cultural and political change**

In medieval times, the term, "philosophy" encompassed not just the Greek and Roman classics that we consider to be philosophical texts (Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Categories, for example), but also what we would now consider to be theology, economics, and political science. This made philosophy both more immediately practical and more potentially treacherous, since it could be looked at as destabilizing to vested interests, namely the church and the state (aka, monarchy), which were often intertwined and interdependent.

So, philosophy was considered to be of powerful, tangible import, and not simply a bundle of abstract ruminations written in highly specialized language (or jargon), which is the way it is often considered in the 21st century. During the Middle Ages and even through the Renaissance, philosophical texts were living, breathing guides for living. They often illustrated the ideal world or social order (translations of Plato's *The Republic*) and the medieval cosmogenies that placed the Earth in the middle of the solar system, were not simply works of speculative astronomy, but also commentaries and guides to notions of earthly hierarchy. God and God's emissaries, the Kings, were at the center, and the Sun rotated around the Earth, signifying their core importance and the place on the top of the hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being.

The texts that were studied during medieval times had often contradictory messages. For that reason, they were used as tools both to reinforce the social order, but also to break away and undermine the dominant institutions, such as the church and the state.

A few questions are worth examining at this point:

- How did Medieval philosophy both reinforce and destabilize the prevailing views of authority?
- Who were Medieval philosophy's most stabilizing philosophers and writers?
- Which ones were the most dangerous?

### **Boethius and the Consolation of Philosophy: The Initial Shaping Force of Medieval Philosophy**

Boethius (480-524 AD), was born in Rome and died in Pavia in the aftermath of the Roman Empire, which had broken into two parts: Byzantium (centered in Constantinople), and Western Germanic Chieftains and warring tribes. Boethius was an educated man familiar with Greek and Roman classics, and he entered politics. His part of Italy had been controlled by the Ostrogoths. Boethius ascended the ranks, finally working for the king of the Ostrogoths, Theodoric the Great. Boethius fell out of favor when he was suspected of trying to reunite the West and the East and recreate a simulacra of th Roman empire.

He, like many philosophers to come, wrote his greatest works from prison. Boethius was not a habitual criminal; in fact, he rose to prominence in the turbulent times after the collapse of the Roman Empire. He was eventually executed and supposedly consigned to infamy, but his fate actually served to help publicize his great work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which he wrote in 524 AD, which he wrote while he was in prison awaiting execution. Boethius was eventually executed for treason in 525 or 526, which was to say that his writings did not prop up the newly formed kingdom and the idea that kings are selected by God, and are therefore, emissaries of the divine. Instead, Boethius suggests that the world itself is ephemeral and there is no real happiness in the goods and things of the world.

In Book III, Boethius takes aim at happiness and addresses the things that either bring or take away happiness. First, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius looks at the Aristotelian idea that the rational person spends his or her life in the pursuit of happiness, which requires the thinker to spend a great deal of time trying to define happiness and find the conditions for it. For Aristotle and other philosophers, happiness is the culmination of a successful quest for morality and wisdom, for which Lamont (2014) contextualizes Boethius's quest. But, Boethius points out that Boethius takes issue with the idea that happiness can ever be completely non-material.

Taking that notion further, Boethius is revolutionary and subversive in the sense that he says that both morality and wisdom are in many ways undefinable, and thus are mediated and can never be absolutes. Instead, they are culturally-mediated and defined. Happiness must be material, asserts Boethius, but not in hoarding up goods or gold, but in spending it. Further, focusing on luxury or "adornments" only generates unhappiness, as does the focus on building up stores of visible wealth or seeking material security. Materialistic pursuits can engender avarice, which always destroys happiness (Boethius, 524, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm>).

One of the most persistent ideas in Boethius is that of Lady Philosophy and the Wheel of Fortune. The Wheel of Fortune illustrates the idea of fortune as capricious and unpredictable, which reinforces the idea that we should not focus on the delights of this world because they can disappear in a moment. The even more disturbing notion is that what we see in the world (which includes power, prestige, material goods) is perhaps not even real; reality is something that will be revealed to us in the afterlife.

While promoting a neo-Platonic idea of transformation, Boethius was also subversive. He a coded autobiography, one which relates to suffering and identifies with the fallen self, as well as the suffering of Christ. At the same time, it is heretical, as it suggests that Lady Philosophy, rather than faith, triggers and catalyzes his transformation. As Melinda Nielsen has observed, "serving as Boethius's higher self, yet with an objective existence outside of him, Lady Philosophy is the key agent in his transformation (Nielsen, 2014, p 150).

True happiness is to be found in unity with God, which may not always be possible (although we strive for it). The true happiness will occur when united with God: "God and true happiness are one and the same" (Boethius, Book III, X). Seeking pleasure in the material world only leads to spiritual blindness.

Boethius does not seek to define or redefine God, except to suggest that a king is not God, nor is any tyrant. In fact, for Boethius, there is no happiness or satisfaction in material goods conferred by tyrants. To the contrary, what they confer brings about disgrace. For the medieval mind, the notion that the King (or the "tyrant-King") were not directly selected by God was to strip him of his authority and his position in the Great Chain of Being. The ideas of Boethius were extremely influential and his work was translated from Latin into almost all the vernaculars, so that it was accessible to a vast audience.

## Recontextualizing the “Reality Question” in Medieval Philosophers

Traditional views of medieval philosophers focused on the ways that they expressed medieval Christian doctrine. The doctrine itself was considered the center of the “Reality” question, and in many ways, reality does not exist without the official interpretations of sacred Christian texts.

What most medieval philosophers had in common was a desire to express a unifying cosmology, which provided the foundation and scaffolding for both earthly and divine authority, with the monarchy and the church structure (head of the church and its organization), its main objective.

What differentiated the philosophers from each other was her or her unique stance toward authority, his or her ability to construct the perfect apology (and an extremely detailed one) for a classification scheme, and their willingness to tackle tough questions such as “What is Reality?” and “What Lies at the Center of the Universe?” e.g. What is the structure of the world, and who or what is most important?”

New archeological findings, such as hordes, long-buried ruins, and hidden compartments in churches are revealing that the undercurrents and counter-currents of thought were much more diverse and widespread than previously thought. Further, there was a great deal more technology than previously believed, and there were more baths, food storage, and ways to manufacture cloth and to work metal. War, plague, and political pressure resulted in the erasure of vast stores of knowledge and history.

With new views of history, context, and conditions, we are able to recontextualize the philosophers’ questions with a better understanding of how dangerous their views might have been, and who they would have needed to protect them and to promulgate their ideas.

**Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142)/ French:** Abelard was a bold theologian best known for his doomed love of Heloise (and the price he paid). His work focuses on metaphysics and logic, and the philosophy of language. Abelard was very influential with the early Scholastics, and at least 21 followers have been identified, even though many had to write anonymously, and their work had to be introduced very subtly after Pope Innocent II declared in 1140 that Abelard was a heretic (Luscombe, 1969). Abelard was considered dangerous after he suggested that scholars apply the tools of logic and dialectic to questions that were traditionally considered spiritual and mystical.

From a 21st century perspective, Abelard is a bit subversive because he suggests that intention matters more than the actual act, which opens the door to all kinds of contradictions. Generally, intentionality is valued more if it has to do with positive actions, and it suggests that the intent to do a good thing prevails, even if circumstances made it impossible to fulfill the promise or achieve the goal. However, the flip side is also a reality, and it is much more

disturbing. Abelard would suggest that if you have dark thoughts, and you consider evil acts and sink into evil fantasies, you are equally guilty.

The notion that you might be guilty of “thought crimes” means that every person will try to rid themselves of freedom of thought, and instead harness their minds in constant meditation and prayer. The implications are terrifying -- first, of course, because it negates the virtue of freedom of choice and right actions. And then, second, it causes people to be terrified of “thought police” and makes them want to make sure that they do not enter into “thought crimes.” What we see is the possibility of self-imposed “spotless minds” and “thought lobotomies” or “cognitive lobotomies.” From a 21st century perspective, the ideas of Abelard are both relevant and shot through with dystopian visions from the novels of both the 20th and 21st century.

The powerful tool that Abelard offers is the return to the Stoic position that happiness is attainable by living a life in the pursuit of virtue, but while accommodating the Christian notion of happiness in a union with God, either in prayer now or in the afterlife. How this might be implemented in a surveillance society that uses machine learning analyze your patterns and detect possible “thought crimes.”

### **Other Medieval Philosophers**

**Averroes (1126 – 1198) / Spanish-Arabic:** Credited for saving much of Classical Greek and Roman writings from oblivion because he translated it into Latin and wrote extensive commentaries, Averroes was very popular and widely quoted, perhaps in part because of his insistence that religious law is everything, and that one should adhere to church teachings / law. But, Averroes is not completely dogmatic. He read and commented on the Greek philosophers, and he also argued that one should be not restrict one’s reading or thinking, and one should remind oneself that the creation is a constant process. His *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Categories and De Interpretatione* set the stage for the Scholastics and their deductive and syllogistic logic and classification systems.

To the 21st century high-income country mind, Averroes sounds like he’s an advocate of dictatorship or sharia law. But, for a 21st century “failed state” mind, Averroes sounds like a god-send -- all about rule of law, justice, and social safety nets. Like all the medieval thinkers, Averroes is the embodiment of contradiction. Because of that, it’s important to revisit his “saving” of the Classical Greek and Roman writings, and to see just how far he went in cultural as well as linguistic translation. I don’t think Averroes can be taken at face value, particularly when he is such an advocate of wide reading and commentary, and he believes that creation is a continuing process. He advocated following God’s law, which he framed in Sharia law. In order to follow it, one must understand God, and here Averroes holds out hope. God is not a capricious tyrant. God has seven core attributes, which also correspond to human attributes. they are knowledge, life, power, will, hearing, vision and speech. Thus, for the 21st century, Averroes’s ideas require one to take responsibility for all seven attributes and learn to develop each one.

**Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)/ Italian:** Known as the “Doctor of Angels,” Aquinas was intensely influential and popular. He adopted Aristotle’s ideas of categories and minute classification to construct a Christian worldview that was both respectful of the main idea of Christianity (salvation, Trinity), and minute classification schemes (Aristotle’s work on categories and on logic) which were ideal for creating a world with enforceable hierarchies. He examined some of the thorny issues of the day, such as reason vs. revelation, and also perception vs. intuition. His Scholastic Method (the dialectic) which was structured around producing questions and defending them, was the gateway of Scholasticism. Aquinas’s philosophies are powerful tools for times of turbulence due to the fact that they address mental processes and help people understand how they create categories, now they detail how the mind processes.

**Duns Scotus (1266 – 1308) / Scottish:** Known as the “Subtle Doctor”, Duns Scotus emphasized the way that language creates meaning, and then grappled with the Bible and wisdom texts to discuss how the word brings forth life (creation, reality, essence). Duns Scotus was popular in the 20th century, and by rights, he should have been the patron saint of the deconstructivists. But, they do not like to give credit where credit is due, unless it’s given to them directly. The only historical figures they will engage with are the deviants.

Why deviants? Duns Scotus would suggest that language’s failure to correctly represent a reality that is useful for people working in the tangible world is precisely what leads to destructive social trends and an individual’s destructive behavior. So -- “truth” is only seen in the obverse, examples being the public spectacle with its powerful visual metaphors and internalized crime and punishment of a regicide (as purveyed by Michel Foucault). Other cultural icons embraced for their ability to capture the eidolons of the past and power structures (albeit subverted) include the fetishization of a mass murderer (Jack the Ripper) or the normalization of a deranged political prisoner (Marquis de Sade).

Duns Scotus tackled one of the favorite topics of Scholasticism: the problem of universals (are there “universal essences” and is beingness “universal?”), which seems very boring until one realizes that a King’s and a Pope’s authority hangs in the balance. You can’t have every Tom, Dick, and Harry can have their own vision, and then construct their own worldview and cosmology. They may not obey the law or pay their taxes. So, it was important to rein in “Illumination” and give it some real guidelines and outer limits. The same could be said for the will, free will, and morality. Yes, you have choices, but they should be spiritual choices bounded by limits.

**William of Ockham (1285 – 1348) / English:** Known for the “Occam’s Razor” argument (the simpler theory is likely to be the best one), Ockham was very popular for his ways of questioning the nature of every existing thing (What is it made of? What brought it about? What does it do? Why does it do what it does), and expanding a matrix of classifications and hierarchies. Ockham was popular, but he did at times tread on treacherous ground, especially in his suggestion that some universals are only mental constructs, and that since they are only

concepts in the mind, they have different proofs than others, and it is necessary to have a great deal of faith.

Faith and the concept of legitimizing faith was popular with kings and archbishops who wanted to proffer up something to their people when all the evidence around them showed living conditions to be unmitigatedly bad. What constitutes “proof”? In certain ways, “proof” must be manufactured, and it must show that the “correct” explanation is the one that involves the easiest travel from point A to point B. In other words, it’s the most elegant solution.

So, while that sounds good, let’s look at this again. What is the most logical and easiest intellectual travel from Point A to Point B in Culture A may actually be a route with extreme tortuosity and complexity for Culture B. The explanation that fits the bill for individualistic middle class Americans may make no sense at all for a group of collectivist 19th century cannibals living in the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia. And, an illustration of just that clash of cultures can be found in Herman Melville’s novels *Typee* and also *Moby Dick*.

**The Mystics:** We should not forget the mystics. They were extremely important during the Medieval Period, particularly on the heels of an outbreak of Plague, or a crop failure. Their works were circulated widely and considered to have the potential to bring about miracles. Perhaps the most popular in England was Julian of Norwich who was an anchoress in the town of Norwich in east-central England, and one of the most prosperous cities in Europe. She had a series of visions when she was 30 and almost died. Later, she felt that God asked her to retreat from the world so she could reflect on the visions and write them down. So, she became an anchoress, in which she had the Last Rites, and she lived walled up in a set of rooms in which she stayed for the rest of her life. She could speak through a few outside windows and she could deliver her writings. She wrote in the vernacular, English, which was a dangerous thing to do. She wrote of God as love, and suggested that perhaps hell did not actually exist. She also had the audacity to suggest that Christ had attributes of both men and women. Her most famous line, “All shall be well; All shall be well, and All Manner of Things Shall Be Well,” became well known.

**Aquinas, Human Emotion and Cognition:** These perfectly reflect the medieval mindset, and the ideas of the hierarchies that govern the world. When we re-read *Summa Theologicae* and his other works, it is clear that Aquinas derives his sense of order in the world from Aristotle, whose was concerned with classifications and hierarchies. This is something that most scholars have taken for granted, and have in essence, promoted the idea that medieval scholars developed their extremely detailed descriptions of the Christian cosmos by means of rational classification processes.

However, what recent scholars have discovered is that Aquinas’s notions of the functioning of the mind and the meaning-making process were much more subtle. He discusses in great detail how people perceive, and how cognition and emotion are connected to the point that one cannot exist without the other, and, perhaps more powerfully, that one (namely, the

Church) can manipulate (or, more gently, guide) people to a strongly-held set of beliefs and a concept of reality that has been skillfully shaped by harnessing the generation of emotions along with the story, the meaning, and/or the philosophy one wants to implant .

For example, Butera points out that “because love is an emotion that causes an animal to become oriented toward something perceived through the senses, it follows that there should also be an emotion of hate (odium), a contra-orientation, as it were, for whatever is opposed to something loved. If we hate anything, it is only because we already love something else, which we take to be threatened in some way by the hated object” (Butera, 2010, p. 356).

Thus, the emotions give rise to classifications, and one’s preconceived ideas and classifications. Then, with the four kinds of law (Kosmos, Logos, Natural Law, and Human Law) in the *Summa Theologicae*, each is mediated by a belief about reality, and that belief is not as rational and deductive as one might think if one simply looks at syllogisms. Instead, they are based on a belief about reality, which is, in its turn, constructed upon a powerful set of emotions that connect with cognition.

### Medieval Women Mystics

**Catherine of Siena (1347-1380):** Daughter of a working-class wool dyer and lived through the Black Death. She committed herself to Christ at the age of seven. At fifteen, she refused to marry and cut her hair. She was disfigured after smallpox, and not likely to receive offers of marriage so her parents gave her permission to join a third-order Dominican group called the Mantellate. When she was 20 years old, she experienced a "mystical espousal" where she became one with Christ. She has numerous visions which led to prophecies, which were taken so seriously she was an advisor to the Pope. She was famous for the “Love Bridge” which allows Christians to achieve heaven by self-abnegation and rejecting earthly pleasures. Catherine died in 1380 at the age of 33.

**Margery Kempe, (1373-1439)** who was born in Norfolk, England, was married and a businesswoman who owned a brewery. She had very difficult and life-endangering pregnancies, and in them, she suffered a “dark night of the soul.” She had a vision of Christ seated next to her, which encouraged her to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Assisi, Rome, and Germany. She wrote of her visions in her autobiography, which is the first one in the English language. She goes through the extreme phases of the mystical journey, with a tremendous emphasis on suffering and also emotional outbursts (Vitto, 1991). We have substituted patterns and iterative algorithms for supposedly predictive abilities. Our patterns look forward (predictive). Their patterns looked above (understanding our relationship with God / and the structure of the divinely created cosmos (cosmology)).

**Julian of Norwich (1342-after 1416)** was an anchoress who lived in a small church, The Church of St. Julian, in Norwich, England. Her great work is her *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first book of essays in the English language. She discusses her visions, but also their



meanings. They explore the nature of God's love and the sense of acceptance and the divine. It echoes the compassion and acceptance of a St. Mary, but instead of reinforcing a Marian cult, Julian's work attributes the merciful qualities to Christ (and to God).

“Then Julian sees the lord sitting on the ground, alone in the barren wilderness, rather than sitting on a throne. It eventually becomes clear as Julian's chapter further unfolds that this image signifies that God seeks no alternative dwelling place except the human soul which was created to be God's own city and dwelling” (Sheldrake, 2017, p. 7).

This was in reality, quite daring at the time. Julian of Norwich's vision of God (the trinity) as being essentially a disembodied spirit, and thus never actually flesh and blood, or omnipotent; but instead, the animating spirit or phantom animating energy of love, compassion, and self-transformation, was revolutionary. It is the idea of raw power; of electricity ahead of its time. At the time, it might have sounded like pagan pantheistic ideas, or worse, those that have to do with negotiating energy fields (which would translate into human sacrifice).

**Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179):** Hildegard joined her aunt, a nun and a recluse, when she was seven. At that same age, she started to have visions, which she recounted in her letters, visions, prophecies, songs, and morality plays. She was considered a prophet and a clairvoyant, whose primary visions were that of love, transcendence, and an existential reward for doing good works. In the 20th century, she would have spent time in Sedona, Arizona or Ojai, California. In the 21st century, it's hard to see how she might have the same impact; it's not so easy to convince people to join utopian experiments based on a charismatic leader's vision. But, her clear sense of vision does remind one of politicians in countries sick of social inequality and a widening gap between the arrogant rich and the poor living on the margins. Social justice based on envy or “settling the score” never works. Only creating pathways to upward mobility works. Her 21st century counterpart could be Xi Jinping.

**Marguerite Porete** was one of the unfortunate mystics who was burned at the stake as a heretic. She was born a French Beguine from Hainault and lived during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. She published *The Mirror of Simple Souls* in the vernacular French. It was considered heretical because it privileges individual divine revelation and essentially says that all souls are equal, and all have access in their own way and in accordance with their own ways of thinking to God. The soul can achieve its own Goodness (which is a state of being in the soul) on its own accord, and does not need to be absolved by the priest.

### Concluding Thoughts

The 21st century may seem a long way from the medieval world, and our communications which revolve around items shared through social media or processed in the Cloud seem a long way from the day when if you wanted your own copy of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, you had to find a copy and then gain permission to copy it yourself by hand, or pay an amanuensis or scribe to do it for you.

Nevertheless, the pace of change, the sense of a precarious world of disintegrating institutions and the need for hope make a study of medieval philosophers all the more relevant. In addition to providing tools for living, the philosophers of medieval times also addressed strategies for keeping open the free flow of thoughts and ideas, despite living in times of increasing censorship, control of the access of ideas, and distraction by entertainment or trivialities.

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### Web Resources

Encyclopedia Britannica: *Medieval Philosophy*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-philosophy/Medieval-philosophy>

Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Medieval*.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/medieval-art/>

The Walters Museum: *Medieval Europe*

<http://art.thewalters.org/browse/category/medieval-europe/>

*The Deering Family Galleries of Medieval and Renaissance Art, Arms, and Armor*

<http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/saints-and-heroes-art-medieval-and-renaissance-europe>

*The Virtual Abbey: A Medieval Tour / New York Carver*

<http://www.newyorkcarver.com/Abbey.htm>

*Gothic Art / Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mgot/hd\\_mgot.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mgot/hd_mgot.htm)

*WebMuseum, Paris: Gothic Painting (1280 – 1515)*

<http://sunsite.icm.edu.pl/wm/paint/tl/gothic/>

*Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy.* <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm>

*Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica.*  
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