

ANDREAS SPEER, *1000 JAHRE PHILOSOPHIE. EIN ANDERER BLICK AUF DIE PHILOSOPHIE DES 'MITTELALTERS'*, BRILL, BOSTON 2023, 109 PP., ISBN: 9783957432834 (PAPERBACK), 9783969752838 (E-BOOK).

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All those who are « curious about new worlds »,<sup>1</sup> whether they are scholars of medieval philosophy, or have never seriously considered it before, are the professed target audience of this book. Finding the balance between ensuring the accessibility of the topic for the latter and writing something that is still new and interesting to the former is a challenge just as great, if not more so, than Speer's project itself. He aims to not only offer a new perspective on this millennium of philosophizing but to do so in only 100 pages – and he does it admirably. For a book of such brevity, the sophistication and richness of its content, and the precision with which Andreas Speer unfolds it, are striking.

The book consists of four chapters, each of which despite their clear interrelation hold within themselves a complexity and breadth of subject matter that would befit an essay able to stand on its own. Its appendix includes a geographical map reaching from the British Isles and Ireland in the north-west, Timbuktu in the south-west, Aksūm and Mecca in the south, to Multān in the east.<sup>2</sup> There is also a timeline marked by the dates of birth and death of philosophers and other important historical figures, beginning with Thales and ending with Johannes Kepler.

Building on the work of Thomas Bauer, in the first chapter Speer stresses the importance of considering history for philosophy, pointing out that the term « Middle Ages » tends to artificially separate cultural and linguistic traditions intermingling in the philosophical discourse of the time, and to cut it off from its roots in antiquity. Further, it must indeed be viewed as a colonizing misnomer when applied to regions and cultural contexts outside of Western Europe. It is this thesis that sets the scene for the rest of the book and guides Speer's investigation into a new approach to these 1000 years of philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> ANDREAS SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie. Ein anderer Blick auf die Philosophie des 'Mittelalters'*, Brill, Boston 2023, p. VIII: « neugierig auf neue Welten ».

<sup>2</sup> ELMAR HOLENSTEIN, *Philosophie-Atlas. Orte und Wege des Denkens*, Amman-Verlag, Zürich 2004 (2nd edition), p. 91.

In this project, it is the third chapter on which his entire thesis hinges. Here, Speer treats of the proper subject of philosophy, reason, in an investigation that, with the aim of finding the right approach to the diversity of the history of philosophy, analyses the universality of reason and of philosophy itself. Speer asks how, in our increasing focus on authors and traditions that for a long time stood at the periphery of Western academic discussion, we can even assume that any understanding is possible: if there are manifold philosophical languages, which all consist of both the language a certain discourse is held in, such as Arabic or Hebrew, and a pluralism of philosophical concepts and terms, which differs in each tradition, context, and language, what enables us to understand those philosophical languages?

Speer points to the twofold universality of reason, which can be either « weak » or « strong ».<sup>3</sup> Weak universality denotes the universality within the bounds of human reason and explicates, referring to those boundaries, the conditions that make rational speech possible.<sup>4</sup> Strong universality instead entails the crossing of those boundaries, striving towards an all-encompassing perspective on what is first and universal.<sup>5</sup> The universality of reason, either strong or weak, is the condition that must be met to enable philosophizing, as it gives it its realm and subject, and is at the same time the reason why we have so many different philosophical positions and languages, as this universality can be understood and explicated differently, leading to disagreements that will never be resolved. They can, however, be reconstructed and analysed focusing on the conditions that brought them about. This is the historical context, which leads us back to the main thesis of this book, as the historicity of reason is also the cause of the multiplicity of languages of reason. Historical contingency is a condition we can never shake when we study and participate in this debate – we should therefore not seek to elude it, but make it the focus of our analysis, appreciating and adequately considering the variety of approaches from all kinds of starting points, linguistically, regionally, religiously, and culturally speaking. Because of this, the terms « Middle Ages » and « medieval » are fundamentally inadequate.

It is with this in mind that I would like to lead back to the second chapter. Here, Speer admits that while we must break free of the limiting and misleading term « Middle Ages », we will never be able to inhabit a truly objective, complete viewpoint on philosophy and its history. Embracing this contingency, Speer instead opts to change his viewpoints on five fronts: chronologies and topographies, authors and « agents »,<sup>6</sup> and knowledge itself, insofar as it concerns philosophy and science in general. To explicate his whole argumentation would

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<sup>3</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 30: « Akteure ».

go beyond the scope of a review, but some observations can be made considering and juxtaposing the approach he espouses here and the approach he himself follows in this work.

One of the best examples of Speer's successful strategy to unify Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew philosophy in a manner that is accessible to every potential reader and yet does not fail to address the topic's complexity is his explanation of the relation of philosophy and theology. Starting from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* he showcases the importance of Boethius and of the Church fathers – not just mentioning Augustine of Hippo, but Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus as well – in furthering the debate, and adequately addresses the differences to and fusions with Islamic and Jewish thought, demonstrating Stroumsa's whirlpool effect with clarity and brevity.<sup>7</sup>

What makes reading this book especially enjoyable is that Speer does not content himself with simply mentioning different traditions, but makes the effort to underline their specific advantages and virtues, such as the fact that the Byzantines, unlike for example the Latin West, did not have to rely on translations of Ancient Greek texts, which always bore the risk of mistranslation, and thus had a more direct and clear access to the Ancient authorities.<sup>8</sup>

Considering his first viewpoint, chronologies, Speer points out that compartmentalizing history into singular events and actors, and utilizing those to manufacture epochs, runs the risk of arbitrariness and counterfactuality, as this approach tends to put elements that are synchronous to one another into a diachronic order. This is the case, for example, when authors are shuffled into a timeline using their date of birth or of death – which Speer himself does in the appendix. Perhaps a more complex timeline, showcasing also the influence of different authors and traditions on one another could have supported his endeavour even better. I would like to relate this point to an observation Speer makes about topographies. He rightfully states that maps do not simply display the world as it is, but instead design a world and can reflect and enforce a certain worldview.<sup>9</sup> The same must be true of a timeline, into which goes some consideration regarding the question of which people merit inclusion. The timeline in the appendix visualizes a missed opportunity that runs throughout the book, namely the disregard of the contributions of women. One might consider that in this timeline, which ranges from the sixth century B.C. to 1630 C.E., women such as Hypatia of Alexandria, Hildegard von Bingen, and Christine de Pizan could

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<sup>7</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 36–38; SARAH STROUMSA, « Whirlpool Effects and Religions Studies: A Response to Guy G. Stroumsa », in VOLKHARD KRECH, MARION STEINICKE (eds.), *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions and Comparative Perspectives*, Brill, Leiden 2012 (*Dynamics in the History of Religions*, 1), p. 159–162.

<sup>8</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> SPEER, *1000 Jahre Philosophie*, p. 25–26.

and should have been, but were not, included. As Speer addresses the gaps in the widespread philosophical and historical knowledge of many Western Europeans so eloquently and thoroughly, the fact that he did not choose to include female philosophers – not as the centre of his endeavour, but as one facet of the kaleidoscope he is illustrating for us – does constitute a considerable oversight.

While there are some shortcomings in the execution of the project Speer set out for himself, this book is a laudable effort in not just opening up the complexity and diversity that is found in the philosophy of these 1000 years, but guiding the reader through it in a manner that is coherent and aware of its own contingent and particular perspective. It is an invitation to reflect on our own personal standpoint in our research, the acceptance of which must be strongly recommended.