

**Ruedi Imbach. *Minima Mediaevalia. Saggi di filosofia medievale. Flumen sapientiae: Studi sul pensiero medievale 10. Roma: Aracne, 2019. 356 pp. ISBN: 9788825523386. Cloth: €21***

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The volume collects the Italian translation of ten essays by Ruedi Imbach, already published or in way of publication at the time of printing (but all revised for the occasion), complemented by a bibliography of primary and secondary sources and an index of names. A good starting point to understand the purpose of the collection is its title. While “*Minima Mediaevalia*” is an obvious reminiscence of Adorno’s “*Minima Moralia*” (explicitly acknowledged on p. 9), this expression is best understood as a declaration of modesty on the part of Imbach, one not dissimilar to that uttered by Dante at the beginning of his other-worldly journey: “Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono” (*Inf.* II, 32, a passage to which Imbach refers twice in the book, on pp. 37-38 and p. 216). As in the case of Dante, however, Imbach’s journey through (a part of) the texts and authors he cultivated in decades of research is certainly much more significant than the title would allow.

Even though there is no overarching theme running through the essays, written on different occasions and for different purposes, some important threads can be easily recognised. Imbach himself, in the brief introduction to the collection, identifies five of them. The first and most important one is the relationship between master and student, which is placed at the centre of the volume, in Chapter VI. The chapter, dedicated to Imbach’s students, reflects on Dante as a pivotal example of both a “student” (of Brunetto Latini, Vergil and Beatrice) and a “master” (of his readers). In an original comparison, Imbach interprets Dante’s three successive examinations by the Apostles Peter, James and John in *Par.* XXIV-XXVI as leading him to symbolically acquire the degree of a “magister theologiae”. This episode, where Dante displays the knowledge that he has acquired through a *personal* journey of discovery guided by his masters, is taken by Imbach as an effective illustration of Thomas Aquinas’ claim, in *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 11, art. 1, that a master can “cause knowledge” (*causare scientiam*) in the student only if he elicits the student’s ability to discover the truth autonomously. This conception, it should be noted, also grounds Imbach’s constant dialogue, throughout the essays, with his own ‘masters’ and friends, such as Francis Cheneval, Kurt Flasch, Burkhard Mojsisch, Peter von Moos, Thomas Ricklin, Andrea Aldo Robiglio and Irène Rosier-Catach, among many others.

Chapter VI also serves as the juncture between the individual dimension of philosophy, which is at the centre of the former part of the book, and the collective dimension, which is especially prominent in the latter part. More specifically, Chapters I and II are dedicated to the second topic identified by Imbach, namely, the polysemy of the medieval notion of “philosophy” and the ensuing variety of philosophical practices. Chapter I analyses a series

of metaphors of philosophy, while Chapter II focuses on one of these metaphors specifically. The first metaphor of Chapter I is that of philosophy as a hunt for knowledge, which Imbach follows from its origins in Plato to its reception in Ramon Llull, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. The second is that of philosophy as the ascension of a mountain. This image, developed more fully in Chapter II, is best exemplified by Petrarch's ascension to the Mont Ventoux (see *Familiares* IV, 1), where the poet-philosopher finally recognises (with the help of Augustine's admonition from *Conf.* X) that the only landscape worth contemplating is one's own interiority. This is also the reason why the image of the *ascensus* turns, in Chapter I, to that of the mirror, especially prominent in Bernard of Clairvaux (see *De consideratione* II, 5), where self-contemplation becomes a *meditatio mortis*. The third image, that of navigation, sees Ulysses of *Inf.* XXVI as the protagonist. Imbach's most original contribution to the interpretation of the episode is his claim that, ultimately, Ulysses' shipwreck is due to the refusal to put his knowledge and wisdom at the service of his people, rather than to the mere trespassing of the limits to human reason set by God. The last image (prepared by a reflection on medieval readings of the anecdote of Thales' fall into a well) is the myth of the cave or, more precisely, its medieval transpositions in terms of the constant tension between a (Christian) refusal of the world and the unavoidable attraction of its pleasures, as best exemplified by Boccaccio's Introduction to *Decameron's* Fourth Day.

All the images just mentioned have one aspect in common: the philosopher is always represented as a lonely figure. When compared to this solitary quest, Chapter X (prepared for by Chapters VII and IX) represents a perfect counterbalance: here Imbach insists on the collective dimension of philosophical practice and reason more generally in the Latin Middle Ages, the fifth theme in his list. Chapter VII considers the expression "gratiosum lumen rationis", used by Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* I, xviii, 5 to refer to the rational soul as the noblest faculty in man, uncovering the Thomistic roots of Dante's understanding of *ratio*. The collective dimension becomes more prominent in Chapter IX, where Imbach focuses on the "rational" interpretation of the myth of Babel in *De vulgari eloquentia*, thus ushering in a wider reflection on the sharing of reason allowed by language, according to Dante and Aquinas. It is only in Chapter X, then, that the problem of the human genus as a single (and rational) community is taken on explicitly in the context of a study of Dante's political thought. Here Imbach's main focus is on *De monarchia* I, iii, 8, where Dante claims that the proper operation of the human genus as a whole is the actualisation of the potential intellect, thus founding an independent ontological characterisation of the human genus based on the use of reason.

Nevertheless, the dialectic between individuality and collectivity cannot account for two of the main topics of the essays identified by Imbach. This is, I believe, one of the very few weaknesses of the book, since locating all the texts on this clearly recognisable axis would have greatly added to the consistency of the volume, without depriving the reader of the possibility to get a sense of the variety and depth of Imbach's work.

The fourth theme of the essays (the third in Imbach's list) is that of love in the Latin Middle Ages, as resulting from the conjunction of the Greek and the Judeo-Christian

traditions. Chapter V presents a series of important Medieval analyses of love, from Aquinas' conception of *appetitus*, as discussed in *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 26, art. 1, to the cosmological role of love in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Liber de diligendo Deo*. Chapter VIII more specifically tackles the role of love in Dante's *Commedia*, as, again, influenced by Aquinas. Here Imbach discusses at length the conception of the free choice of the object (and the degree) of love as the main criterion to determine the other-worldly destination of souls according to Dante. It is this inherent freedom of human beings, and the responsibility associated with it, which is, according to Imbach, at the centre of the ethical project of the *Commedia*.

The last theme of the essays (the fourth in Imbach's list) is the influence that Biblical exegesis had on philosophical practice during the Middle Ages. Chapter III, in particular, discusses Medieval philosophical interpretations of a set of Biblical passages: Paul's speech in the Aeropagus in Acts 17, 16-34, which poses the question of the possibility and the limits of a rational *intellectus fidei*, the interpretation of *Cant* 1, 7, "Si ignoras te", as the rendering of the Greek "Gnothi seauton", and the possibility of entertaining the proposition "non est Deus", in *Ps* 13, 1 and 52, 1 (which gives Imbach the opportunity to insert an important caveat concerning studies on medieval 'atheism': see pp. 121-127). Chapter IV, instead, deals with the philosophical interpretations of the Prologue of John's Gospel according to Augustine, Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart (whose hermeneutical techniques Imbach reveals with particular skill).

Without doubt, the depth of knowledge and the acute interpretations that Imbach provides, together with his ability to cross chronological, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries, make the book particularly valuable to scholars working not only on medieval philosophy but also on medieval intellectual history *tout court*. Nevertheless, given the scope of the essays, the issues at stake are sometimes addressed too briefly. This is the case, for instance, in Chapter X, where the theoretical and textual tensions inherent in the separation between religious and political power proposed by Dante are left unexplored. Rather than diminishing the value of the book, however, this should be taken as an invitation to further explore the vast sea of Imbach's scholarship.