The Long Middle Ages in Philosophy: a justification.

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Abstract
This paper aims to show that the well-known date of Medieval Philosophy, which stretches from 500 to 1500, hides its richness and influences (from previous thought and to posterior thought) and, at the same time, applies extremely rigid boundaries. Facing this theory here is defended the idea of a Long Middle Ages in the Philosophy of the broad Western tradition, which stretches from 200 to 1700. Along these pages, this thesis will be justified, and some objections will be faced, such as that it homogenizes different types of philosophy, that it underestimates the importance of modern science, or that it overlooks Renaissance Philosophy.
Keywords: Long Middle Ages; Western Philosophy; Historical Analysis; History of Philosophy.

Resumen
El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar que la archiconocida localización temporal de la filosofía medieval entre los años 500 y 1500 oscurece su gran riqueza e influencias (tanto previas como posteriores) a la vez que aplica límites extremadamente rígidos. Frente a esta idea se defiende la existencia de una larga Edad Media en la filosofía occidental (ampliamente concebida) que abarca, aproximadamente, desde el año 200 hasta el 1700. A lo largo de las páginas se justificará la propuesta y se hará frente a las críticas que sostienen que esta teoría homogeneiza diversos tipos de filosofía, subestima el desarrollo de la ciencia moderna o infravalora la filosofía del Renacimiento.
Palabras clave: Larga Edad Media; Filosofía occidental; Análisis histórico; Historia de la Filosofía.

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1 • Introduction. Anachronism and Catholicity

Medieval philosophy is usually thought to date from c. 500 to c. 1500. I argue that, rather, there is a Long Middle Ages in philosophy in the broad Western tradition, which stretches from c. 200 to c. 1700, from the time of Plotinus to that of Leibniz (or later in the Islamic world).[2]

In Section (2), I discuss the idea of chronological boundaries in historiography and explain why I advocate the use of shallow period divisions. Section (3) sets out the central argument: after explaining what I mean by 'the broad Western tradition', I give, first, the intrinsic reasons for choosing c. 200 as the starting date for a Long Middle Ages and placing its finishing date at c. 1700 or later, and second some extrinsic reasons for choosing these boundaries. In (4) I consider three of the most powerful objections to this periodization: that it overlooks Renaissance Philosophy; that it homogenizes different types of philosophy, ignoring important moments of change or discontinuity; that it underestimates the importance of the modern science of the seventeenth century.

But, first, there is an important preliminary. My argument is based on the view that any History of Philosophy ranging over many centuries must be an anachronistic enterprise.[3] The reason is that we expect History of Philosophy to be about what we now recognize as philosophy. But there was no corresponding conception at any time before the nineteenth century. Rather, there were periods and places (ancient Greece and Rome, seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe) where the word 'philosophy' (as rendered in different languages) was used to describe an activity that embraced the thinking of the time on many of the questions we now describe as philosophical, but also large areas of what we consider to be the various natural sciences. And there were periods (most or all of what will

2 I have developed these ideas in Marenbon 2011b, 2017a, 2017b, 2023 (Section 5), 2024, 365-366 and Forthcoming.

3 I use 'History of Philosophy' to describe the activities of historians of philosophy, whereas 'the history of philosophy' refers to the first-order philosophical activity about which they write.

be called here the Long Middle Ages, c. 200 – c. 1700) when 'philosophy' was used in this broad sense, or an even broader one, but a great deal of the thinking that we would call philosophical took place under other rubrics, such as *kalām*, Talmudic studies and theology. Almost every broad *History of Western Philosophy* selects its material, therefore, not in accord with the various classifications of knowledge of past times and places, which would not yield a history that we would recognize as being *of philosophy,* but using a contemporary view about what should count as philosophy. Such inevitable anachronism, which has important implications for thinking about periodization, is not harmful so long as it is recognized and, where opportune, explained to students and readers; and so long as the historian takes the trouble to place back the material recognized as philosophical within its wider, from our perspective non-philosophical, context.[4]

The starting point for History of Philosophy needs to be, then, what we now recognize as philosophy, but what is that? It is different, of course, depending on who 'we' are: whether we are for instance, analytical philosophers, or phenomenologists, or Marxists or neo-scholastics or that strange category described by English-speaker as 'continental philosophers'. Philosophers from any of these groups might (and often do) use their own, comparatively narrow view of what is philosophy as a basis for their exploration of history. But if our concern is to gain as broad an understanding of past philosophical thinking as possible, and for it to illuminate present philosophical thinking as widely as possible, then there is a good argument for catholicity. Historians of philosophy should, on this view (which I endorse), look back to the past with the full range in mind of what is regarded by at least some now as philosophy.

2 • Period Divisions: Deep, Notional and Shallow

Historians may either hold that the period divisions are meaningful, or that they are not meaningful (or they may simply not bother about them). To

4 I discuss this as an aspect of what I call 'historical analysis' in Marenbon 2011, 72-73; cf. Marenbon 2024, 367-368.

consider them meaningful is to claim that they are based on features of the material studied and there are intrinsic arguments in their favour. Those who hold they are not meaningful say that there are no such intrinsic arguments, although they do have extrinsic, pragmatic arguments for the divisions they choose. For them period divisions are, therefore, merely notional.

2.1. Deep Period Divisions

Most defenders of meaningful period divisions take them to be deep. They believe that they are cutting history — social, economic, cultural and intellectual — all the way through at its joints. These divisions, they claim, are (unless they are mistaken) the right ones. In their extreme form, as proposed by Hegel and championed by Dilthey, deep period divisions involve the idea that there is a Spirit of each Age, each period bounded by these divisions. Although this approach seems antiquated, it is openly adopted by some of the best known of those writers today who look to the narrative of past philosophy to offer more than interesting arguments or purely historical knowledge — for example, in the Anglophone world, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. One apparently deep division that lies close to the subject of this paper is the Long Middle Ages advocated by Jacques Le Goff, which applies to the history of Europe in general and stretches until the industrial revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century.[5]

If historians were able to produce highly convincing arguments for a set of deep chronological divisions, then there would be little choice but to accept them. But the onus of proof is on them. And it is hard to see how a strong argument could be made except from the standpoint of a metaphysical view, such as the Hegelian one, which justifies them. Otherwise there seems no good reason to believe that different aspects of life and different practices march in chronological step. Le Goff's very long Middle Ages seems to be a counter-example, because he bases his views on empirical evidence, not metaphysical theory. But the depth of his period division is really no more than apparent. Although he may seem to be claiming more, he can be interpreted charitably as proposing a well justified shallow divi-

5 See Le Goff 2004, 57-70; 2014, esp. 137-186.

sion that applies to the economic organization of European society in and its everyday life.

2.2. Notional Period Divisions

Most of the more specialized medievalists reject deep period divisions and take the diametrically opposed view. Period divisions, they say, are not meaningful. None the less, there is a pragmatic, extrinsic reason for adopting them: a division of labour is necessary.[6] Their period divisions are, therefore, merely notional ones.

Despite their widespread acceptance, there are two strong arguments against the exponents of merely notional period divisions. First, they need to provide a pragmatic argument not only for following some period divisions rather than none, but for choosing the period divisions they do. In practice, they almost always follow the most widely accepted period divisions: 500 to 1500 is a favourite span for the Middle Ages. The pragmatic argument would be that, since the divisions are meaningless, it is best to accept the *status quo* about them, the line of least resistance. But, although the figures may be rounded to emphasize that they do not correspond to significant events, as Luca Bianchi puts it: 'the labels that we use to designate historical have their own history, they belong to the way we imagine the world, and for this reason they are not nor could ever be neutral …'[7] When 'Medieval Philosophy' is attached to much the same period as it was by those who believed that it was a deep period division, it brings that ideological baggage with it, but concealed. Two simple examples: when 'Medieval Philosophy' is deemed to label 500 – 1500, (1) the texts from 1500 to 1700 that follow the interests and forms of thought and writing of the preceding centuries are automatically pushed to the side-lines; (2) the Latin tradition is taken as dominant and made the main focus of attention, because this periodization was devised by those who saw it in this way and, indeed, regarded Arabic, Jewish and Greek philosophy as of interest only in so far as it provided sources for the Latin authors.

6 Cf. Marenbon 2017a, 151-152. The most detailed working out of this position is in De Rijk 1985, 1-64.

7 Bianchi 2024, 397.

Second, the pragmatic argument from the division of labour used to justify making period divisions at all is a bad one. No single scholar can work on everything, and most academics pride themselves on being specialists. They are specialists, however, not on a wide area that might correspond to a period division, but on some smaller field inside it – not medieval philosophy, but, for instance, Maximus the Confessor or Henry of Ghent or Suhrawardī or twelfth and thirteenth-century Arabic logic or practical wisdom in university philosophy and theology. If these specialisms need to be sorted and grouped, one way is to do so chronologically, and then period divisions become necessary. But they could be, and often are, grouped in other ways: by topic, so that, for instance, there is a grouping of those working on logical inference in texts from whatever period (and on it as a contemporary problem); or by bringing together specialists on different authors whose works are linked (Plotinus, Maximus, Eriugena, Nicholas of Cusa, for example; or Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Mulla Sadr). That is to say, the specialists can simply not bother about the whole question of period divisions, and where they wish to venture outside their specialized areas, they can design their courses and choose their conversation partners according to criteria other than chronology. There will, indeed, be a sense in which, although they are writing about philosophers from the past, they are not really engaged in history. Historical thinking does demand attention to chronology, even if (for some areas, but hardly philosophy) it is according to the *longue durée.* But once attention is given to chronology, period divisions cease to be meaningless. It might be difficult to determine where to place them, but the significance of posing them, and debating them, is obvious. This conclusion does not, however, mean that historians should return to deep period divisions.

2.3. Shallow Period Divisions

Period boundaries can be meaningful without being deep. Shallow (but still meaningful) period boundaries will usually be limited to a single area of past life: to art history, or warfare, or agriculture, or economics, for instance — or philosophy. The intrinsic justification for using these boundaries will be that there are good reasons, found in the historical material itself, for following

them; that by doing so, the search for historical truths and the effort to understand and present them will be promoted. So, for example, the beginning of a period in agriculture might be marked by a change in climactic conditions and the end by the discovery of a technique that changed how people went about farming. The period therefore provides a convenient unit for study and for comparison of situations that have important elements in common. Beginnings and endings in the branches of intellectual history are unlikely to be so straightforwardly indicated, but they might be marked by the growing up of an intellectual tradition and its disappearance from prominence.

Shallow period divisions need to be based good reasons such as these, but the advocate of one set of period divisions does not have to show that it is better than any other. Indeed, it is plausible that, in any area, there is an immense variety of good period divisions, some suited to one moment in the history of research rather than another, but others equal competitors at the same time, none of which needs be considered the loser. In consequence, overlap should be expected and welcomed. To take an example particularly pertinent to this discussion: there is no opposition or tension between the decision of some historians to make 200 AD the start of a Long Middle Ages, and others to retain a tradition periodization for ancient philosophy, from before Socrates to the sixth century.[8]

Advocates of deep period divisions regard the large chunks into which they divide history as specially privileged. There may be sub-divisions, but they are intrinsically different, merely notional. So, for instance, those who held that the seven centuries from, say, 800 were in some deep sense medieval, would also countenance a division into early Middle Ages, High Middle Ages and Later Middle Ages.[9] This, however, would usually be regarded as a merely notional division, useful for dividing up courses and textbooks. By

8 For further discussion of shallow period divisions, see Marenbon 2017a, 148-149.

9 The Wikipedia entry nicely puts this common understanding: 'The High Middle Ages, or high medieval period, was the period of European history that lasted from AD 1000 to 1300. The High Middle Ages were preceded by the Early Middle Ages and were followed by the Late Middle Ages, which ended around AD 1500 (by historiographical convention)': https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Middle_Ages#:~:text=The%20High%20Middle%20Ages%2C%20or,1500%20(by%20historiographical%20convention).

contrast, there is no reason why there should not be a hierarchy of shallow period divisions, with one or more layer(s) of division below top-level periods such as the Long Middle Ages. At each level, the claim would be that there is good reason for the divisions, without excluding there being good reason for different divisions. Historians are not, however, compelled to accept a hierarchy of shallow chronological divisions, because they may prefer to divide the material in one main, lengthy period in non-chronological ways. Whatever the choice, it would seem that there is an advantage in making the top-level periods long, so as to permit flexibility for sub-division with them.

Advocates of deep period divisions have no need to turn to extrinsic, pragmatic arguments. They are claiming that, in virtue of their intrinsic arguments, they have come to the right chronological divisions; they have cut history at its joints. Extrinsic arguments are, however, important for proponents of shallow period divisions. They are claiming merely that there are good intrinsic reasons for their division, but there may be good intrinsic reasons too for various other divisions. Extrinsic reasons may be decisive in making their shallow divisions choice worthy.

3 • A Long Middle Ages in Philosophy

The ground is now almost clear to give the justification for a Long Middle Ages in philosophy, by considering the arguments for its starting and finishing points. But not in philosophy everywhere. I claim, as a useful shallow period division, a Long Middle Ages in the history of *Western* philosophy – in other traditions, such as those of India and China, the divisions may well be entirely different. But what counts as Western philosophy?

3.1. The Broad Western Tradition

Traditional historians who put Aquinas at the centre of their account of medieval philosophy recognized long ago that, without studying Greek Christian writers, such as pseudo-Dionysius and John of Damascus, and Arabic ones, both Muslims, especially Avicenna and Averroes, and Jews, in particular Maimonides, it was impossible to understand the philosophers and theologians in the Latin universities. There seems no good historical

reason, however, why these traditions should be seen merely as sources for Latin Christian thinking. Rather, to anyone looking from as neutral a perspective as possible, there are four separate but interconnected sub-traditions of philosophizing, all drawing on the Greek traditions as an important source, through the intermediary of the revived Platonism of Plotinus and Porphyry, which was taught in the late ancient Schools of Athens and Alexandria: Greek Christian philosophy, Arabic philosophy (as practised by Muslims and, occasionally, Christians), Jewish philosophy (from the Islamicate world and in Arabic until c. 1200; then from Christian Europe, in Hebrew) and Latin (Christian) philosophy.[10] These sub-traditions are connected not only in their origins but through a series of interactions, made possible by translation movements (from Greek to Latin; Greek to Arabic; Arabic to Latin; Latin to Greek; Arabic to Hebrew; Hebrew to Latin and Latin to Hebrew).[11]

Of course, individual historians will most usually specialize in one of these sub-traditions; indeed, in a small area of one of them. They may then decide to draw shallow chronological boundaries within that particular sub-tradition, and justify them within it. But there is a special place, in so far as they can be found, for boundaries that can be shown to serve a purpose for the broad Western tradition, of which these sub-traditions are parts, since such boundaries will be those that best promote the comparative work invited by it.

3.2. The beginning of the Long Middle Ages in philosophy: c. 200

The broad Western tradition of philosophy began from Greek philosophy — not the earliest Greek philosophers, but from Plato and, above all, Ar-

10 The Jewish authors in the Islamicate world became fully absorbed into Arabic culture, and so some historians would categorize differently, putting all Arabic language philosophy together to form one tradition, and seeing Jewish philosophy in Hebrew as a distinct tradition. There were also other sub-traditions also deriving from the Platonic Schools, in Syriac and Armenian.

11 The pioneer in approaching medieval philosophy as the story of these four sub-traditions was Alain de Libera (2004). Others have followed and developed this approach, myself included. There is now a radical view that challenges the value of the idea of Western Philosophy altogether. For a general, public presentation of this view, see Platzky-Miller and Cantor 2023.

istotle. Although there was direct contact with Aristotle's work and some of Plato's, the relationship was, as mentioned in the last section, through an intermediary. Plato and his followers, the Academics, and Aristotle and his followers, the Peripatetics, were just two out of a variety of schools — alternative ways of doing philosophy that also included Epicureanism, Stoicism and Scepticism and flourished in the ancient world. In the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, the most important of these, especially for the political elite, was Stoicism. But, with the work of Plotinus (204/5 – 270 CE), Platonism became the dominant type of philosophy, and his pupil Porphyry ensured that Aristotelianism was also included, as a propaedeutic that harmonized with it, and so the curriculum of the so-called 'Platonic' Schools of Athens and Alexandria started with a thorough study of almost the whole of Aristotle, beginning with his logic, before finally moving on to Plato. This Platonism-harmonized-with-Aristotelianism was not, as Stoicism had been, just the most important of a number of philosophical approaches. It became the only way of being a philosopher.

A good reason for marking a chronological boundary is so as to trace a tradition, and the work of Plotinus and Porphyry (his contribution was vital, because it led to the predominantly Aristotelian character of medieval philosophizing) is the obvious starting point for the a philosophical tradition which went on to flourish in the (broadly defined) West. The pagan Greek Platonic but also strongly Aristotelian tradition of the later Empire was the trunk, rooted in earlier Greek philosophy, from which the different sub-traditions branched out: the Arabic sub-tradition (and through it the Jewish) through direct contact with the work of the School of Alexandria; the Greek Christian tradition, which had direct access to much of the late ancient work, although its exponents were often restricted by ecclesiastical hostility to 'Hellenism' — enthusiasm for the thinking of the pagan past; and the Latin tradition both directly through Boethius (476 – 524/5), and from Augustine (354 – 430), who refounded Latin philosophizing on the basis, especially, of what he learned from Plotinus and Porphyry.

It seems, then, that c. 200 is a good point for a chronological boundary, at the bottom of the trunk that branches out into the sub-traditions of broad Western philosophy. Why not earlier, beginning with Plato and Aristotle themselves? Because moving the boundary line back would fail

to bring out the radical change that took place when the competing schools of philosophy were replaced by a single, accepted approach and just two figureheads, Plato and Aristotle.

But why not later? According to Robert Pasnau,

> **There is now some consensus on where and when to place the beginnings of medieval philosophy: it begins in Baghdad, in the middle of the eighth century, and in France, in the itinerant court of Charlemagne, in the last quarter of the eighth century.**[12]

It is certainly right that philosophizing in Arabic – both *falsafa*, which explicitly continues Greek-style philosophy, and *kalām*, rooted in Qu'ranic thought – begins only after about 750 and develops remarkably in the ninth century, and it has been argued (wrongly) by many, myself included, that Medieval Latin philosophy first began at the court of Charlemagne, after three centuries without philosophy.[13] There are, however, three different objections, to this choice. First, it is pure coincidence that philosophy began to flourish in the early Abbāsid court, in Baghdad, at much the same time as Alcuin and his circle were doing their work three thousand miles away in Aachen. Second, it is wrong to say that there was no philosophy in the Latin West between Boethius and Alcuin: it is a matter of looking more carefully and being open-minded about what counts as philosophy.[14] Third, 800 makes no sense at all as a starting point for the Greek Christian tradition, which exhibits an intellectual continuity from

12 Pasnau 2014, 1. Pasnau says in a footnote that 'traditionally, Augustine (354-430) and Boethius (c. 475 -526) have been included in the medieval curriculum, but they are manifestly part of the ancient world'. Certainly, they belonged to the ancient world, Boethius even more clearly than Augustine, but the history of philosophy need not follow the same divisions as political history.

13 Marenbon 1988, 45-46; 2007, 48. Pasquale Porro (2024, 419-420) uses the disappearance of philosophy in this period to teach the lesson that there is no necessity that philosophy should be practised in every age (in any given wide geographical area). But his initial assumption should be queried.

14 I am planning to do this in one of the chapters of a book I am writing with Nadja Germann (provisionally title *The Emergence of Medieval Philosophy*), commissioned by Oxford University Press.

the time of Origen (c. 185 – c. 253). There are good reasons, then, to stick with c. 200 as a starting point for the Long Middle Ages.[15]

3.3. The ragged ending of the Long Middle Ages in Philosophy

Choosing an end point is more difficult. Traditionally, historians of medieval philosophy (who have concentrated mainly or wholly on the Latin tradition) choose c. 1500 as their stopping point, because that (or as some of them more picturesquely prefer, 1492, the date of Columbus's first voyage and of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain) is what political, social and institutional historians usually do.

There is, however, no reason why the shallow period divisions for a particular area, such as philosophy, will fall in line with those in different areas. In any case, the geography is different. When 1500 is set as a boundary by political, social and institutional historians, they are thinking about Western Europe. The broad West in philosophy stretches far further.

Yet, although the idea that medieval Western philosophy is a multicultural tradition, with Latin, Greek, Arabic and Jewish branches, is now widely accepted, there has been little discussion of when, on this view, the end of the Middle Ages should be placed. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy* covers all four sub-traditions but its editor picks the period 500 – 1500 without claiming that there is anything significant about these dates.[16] The *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy,* similarly ambitious in principle in covering the different sub-traditions, is tight-lipped about its chronological range, but – to judge from the chronological limits laid down for its collection of 'Biographies of Medieval Authors'– it places the ending of medieval philosophy in the early fifteenth century.[17]

15 Luca Bianchi (2024,405; 410) proposes a much later start, c. 1100, with thinkers such as Eriugena and Anselm attached to the late ancient Platonic tradition. This starting point is relevant clearly only for the Latin tradition and so should not be considered as an alternative to the c. 200 date proposed here. It does, however, pose the question of whether a lower-level division c. 1100 should be made in looking at the Latin tradition. Some considerations, both about the texts studied and how they were studied, would suggest a division rather earlier, in the mid-tenth century.

16 Lagerlund 2020a, v.

17 Pasnau 2014, 833.

One historian who has thought explicitly about this problem of setting an ending is Alain de Libera, in the book where he pioneered the multicultural approach to medieval philosophy. His dating therefore provides a good point of departure for a discussion, especially since it turns out that De Libera chooses the traditional stopping point, a thousand years after his point of departure at the end of the fifth century, with Boethius in the Latin tradition and pseudo-Dionysius in the East – that is to say, 1500, but he does so for untraditional reasons. 'After a thousand years of history,' he writes

> **four geo-cultural ensembles – the Christian East and West, the Islamic East and West – leave the philosophical stage, each with its own destiny. Philosophy partly disappears in Islam; Judaism turns to the Kabbalah; the Christian world breaks with the Middle Ages.**[18]

Discussion earlier in the book fills out this laconic comment. After the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, a Hellenism continued in Greece, says De Libera, but it was a Christian Hellenism 'without philosophy'.[19] He accepts that 'people continued to do philosophy Islam beyond the fifteenth century' in the Persian area, but it is 'philosophy of illumination', an 'oriental' philosophy'; and he links the demise of Islamic philosophy in Western or 'Mediterranean' Islam with the end of the translation movement.[20] De Libera does not explain further about the fate of Jewish philosophy, but he argues that the end of medieval Latin philosophy is signalled by the break with logic and with 'Arabism'. The Renaissance built its own, new identity, he argues, based on a direct continuity with Greek antiquity, to be studied in the original language, and without the external intermediary of Arabic scholarship and thought.[21]

De Libera's end date for medieval philosophy turns out, therefore, as already said, to be the same for all four sub-traditions and to be roughly the traditional 1500. But his implicit methodology need not have led to that result. He looks for what I call shallow period divisions in each of the

18 De Libera 2004, 485
19 De Libera 2004, 51.
20 De Libera 2004, 184-185.
21 De Libera 2004, 487.

sub-traditions, not assuming that they will coincide, although in fact in his judgement they do.[22] This approach is a good one, because it would be perverse to place an ending in one of the sub-traditions at the point where intrinsic factors, not in it, but one of the other sub-traditions, indicated. There are strong arguments, however, that De Libera misplaces the end point for each of the sub-traditions and that, on a more considered view, what emerges is a ragged borderline between medieval philosophy and its successor. Each sub-tradition, therefore, must be considered in turn.

Greek Christian philosophy did not end with the Byzantine Empire at the Fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, although this date does almost coincide with the death, a year earlier, of the last great figure in the tradition, Gemistos Plethon. Under Turkish occupation, Christians continued to philosophize in Greek, influenced by Latin scholasticism in the seventeenth century and by modern currents in European thought in the eighteenth.[23]

De Libera's comments about the end of Arabic philosophy are hard to understand. The translation of Greek texts into Arabic took place almost entirely before 1000, and so the end of the translation movement can hardly be linked with an end of Arabic philosophy placed, by De Libera, c. 1500. Long before this date too direct reference back to Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers had all but ceased; Aristotelianism had been given its Arabic home in Avicenna's unfaithful but profound and brilliant reconstruction, on which philosophers continued to comment for centuries. This tradition was frequently combined with *kalām* and Sufi ideas, from the time of al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) onwards. Given the catholic approach to the range of philosophy urged above, there is no reason to regard any of these three approaches as non-philosophical, even less their combination. The Arabic tradition of philosophizing continued, then, unbroken, in Persia with the work of the al-Dashtakīs, father and son (d. 1498, d. 1542), who kept close to the Avicennian tradition, al-Dawānī (d. 1501), who read Avicenna in the

22 For the shallowness of period divisions, consider De Libera's comment (2004, 486-487); 'Les frontiers ne sont pas ce que l'on dit. La césure entre le Moyen Age et l'Antiquité tardive ou celle entre le Moyen Age et la Renaissance n'existent pas *en soi.* Elles changent selon les secteurs du savoir, les problèmes, les disciplines et les méthodes.'
23 See Podskalsky 1988.

light of the twelfth-century Avicennian, Suhrawardī's 'philosophy of illumination' and the Sufi-inspired mysticism of Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240) and Mulla Sadr (1571–1636), who extended this approach in an original and influential way. But not only in Persia: Ismail Gelenbevī (d. 1790/91), who lived in Ottoman Turkey, was perhaps the last great philosopher in the tradition, but logic and philosophy fully continuous with the Arabic tradition as it had developed after Avicenna continued to be produced in the widely-flung Islamicate world through the nineteenth century.[24]

Although De Libera's end date for the Latin tradition coincides with what has commonly been used, his reason for it is different from the usual ones which, it has been argued, are not relevant to making a shallow period division. Deliberately turning on its head the once cherished vision of medieval philosophy as Christian philosophy, De Libera sees it ending once logic declines and thinkers, with the Renaissance scorn of all but Greek and Roman antiquity, turn their backs on what he calls 'arabism' – openness to the writings of Avicenna, Averroes and other writers from the Islamicate world.[25] Work on the branches of the *logica modernorum*, an important activity for logicians from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, did indeed dwindle after 1500, but the study of Aristotelian logic continued, now varied by humanist adaptations and developments. Interest in Arabic philosophy and science, as is evident both from the number of printed editions and the discussions and controversies of the time, in no way declined in the sixteenth century, arguably the Golden Age for interest in Averroes among Latin scholars.[26] Luca Bianchi is therefore certainly right to move De Libera's end point forward by a century and reject his claimed antagonism between renaissance humanism and Arabic learning, seeing rather the whole period from about 1100 to 1600 as one of progressive opening up of Latin thinking to a whole range of new texts, from antiquity and from the Islamicate world.[27] But why stop at 1600? Certainly, interest in Averroes falls off rapidly.[28] But towards the end of the seventeenth century Ibn Tu-

24 See El-Rouayheb 2022 and Kaukua 2022.
25 De Libera 2004,485.
26 This has been shown beyond all doubt by Dag Hasse's very important study (2016).
27 Bianchi (2024), 405-406.
28 Commenting on the reissue of the Giunta edition of Aristotle with the commentar-

fayl's philosophical novel, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, was first translated into Latin. More generally, the century and a half after 1600 was a time of openness in European philosophy to new texts, including those of Chinese philosophy. The closing of the mind that made History of Philosophy into a narrowly European narrative took place in the later eighteenth century.[29]

There are two good reasons for placing the shallow of medieval Latin philosophy at about 1700 (or stretching it up to the death of Leibniz in 1716). First, it is only towards the end of the seventeenth century that the university Arts curriculum, established in the mid-thirteenth century, began to change under the influence of Cartesianism and the new science more generally. Until then, the textual tradition of the study of Aristotelian logic, science and philosophy remained intact (although some Protestant universities dropped the *Metaphysics*). Moreover, especially but not only in the Iberian peninsula, philosophy continued to be done within theological discussions, as in the preceding centuries. Suárez lived until 1617, Hurtado de Mendoz until 1641, Arriaga to 1667 and the polymathic Caramuel y Lobkowitz to 1682. Outside Spain, the Irish Scotist John Punch died in 1661, the Italian Scotist Bartolommeo Mastri in 1673. These figures are usually relegated to the margins of accounts of seventeenth-century philosophy, precisely because it is assumed that a new era has begun and that they are hangovers who, if they are to be considered at all, must be deemed not to belong to the times in which they lived, but to an extra-chronological 'silver scholasticism'; and yet it is their work that is in harmony with what remained the university curriculum throughout these decades.

Second, the figures who are usually considered as the main representatives of seventeenth-century European philosophy, such as Descartes, Malebranche, Arnauld, Pascal and Leibniz are incomprehensible except when seen within the context of the philosophical views of the previous centuries: Descartes rejects Aristotelianism while not preventing it from shaping much of his thinking, Leibniz prefers to adapt aspects of it.

ies of Averroes, Hasse (2014, 17) says: 'The Giunta edition, a monument of Renaissance editorship, may have sparked interest in Averroes for a limited period, but, ironically, it also marks the end of the long history of the Western transmission of Averroes.' But controversies about Averroes continued: cf. Martin 2015.

29 Cf. König-Pralong 2019, esp. 81-97.

All four French philosophers were strongly influenced by Augustine (who, since the thirteenth century, had provided a foil for those unwilling to accept an Aristotelian viewpoint), and Descartes starts his epistemology from a characteristically late medieval formulation of scepticism.[30] The ties are, admittedly, less strong for the best-known English philosophers, Hobbes and Locke, but it is only with *A Treatise of Human Nature,* written by David Hume in the later 1730s that a reader enters into a searching and thorough philosophical enquiry that seems to owe almost nothing to the previous millennium of philosophy.

Finally, when does the Long Middle Ages end for Jewish philosophy? De Libera was right to point to the increased importance of Kabbalah for Jewish philosophers from the sixteenth century onwards, but this change did not mean that the older philosophical interests were abandoned (nor should philosophy be considered simply to antithetical to Kabbalah – just as it should not be considered antithetical to or incompatible with Sufism, or with the stream of Greek thinking that ended with Gregory Palamas). Moreover, De Libera's summary judgement ignores the Jewish philosophers who went to the Ottoman Empire after Jews were expelled from Spain and continued with the approaches to philosophy used before the expulsion,[31] and the remarkable figure of Joseph Delmedigo (1591-1655), a physician, an astronomer who was taught by Galileo and was an early advocate of Copernicanism, and also a philosopher.[32] If it is accepted that the last philosophers of the Long Middle Ages in the Latin Christian tradition include Descartes and Leibniz, it would make good sense to consider Spinoza as the last of them in the Jewish tradition since, for all his iconoclasm, he develops his thinking in dialogue not just with Descartes, but Maimonides, Hasdai Crescas and Leone Ebreo.[33]

30 Lagerlund 2020b, 81-100, cf. 124.

31 See Tiroth-Rothschild 2003, 529-545 for an introduction

32 See Brown 2014, 66-81; Feldman 2003, 431-434

33 Whereas historians of philosophy have not usually been willing to consider Descartes or Leibniz as figures at the end of the medieval tradition, such an approach to Spinoza is in fact less unprecedented. The authoritative *Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy* ends its first volume with Spinoza. The editors explain that most of their studies concern the medieval period and that Spinoza supplies a final 'bookend' to this period (Nadler and Rudavsky XXXX, 1). The individual thematic chapters show how well Spi-

3.4. Extrinsic Reasons for a Long Middle Ages

As explained in 2.3, although there need to be intrinsic reasons why shallow period divisions fit the historical material, extrinsic, pragmatic reasons are also important for showing why one set of divisions should be preferred to others, for which there are also good intrinsic reasons.

One strong pragmatic reason for advocating a Long Middle Ages in philosophy is simply that it does not respect the usually accepted boundaries and so encourages historians to envisage philosophers in a new light. In the usual way of doing things, there is one group of scholars, specialists in ancient philosophy, who study Plotinus and Porphyry, who are seen as late representatives of the tradition of Plato; a quite different group studies Avicenna, and a different group again Spinoza. Yet, in this case as in so many others, there are important direct and indirect influences, and many questions of common concern between the four (Plotinus, Porphyry, Avicenna and Spinoza). This is not to deny that there are strong continuities between, for instance, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and Porphyry. But the usual periodization, which structures academic specializations, will ensure that these are noticed and relentlessly examined and that they will not be forgotten if the accepted periodization comes to co-exist with, or even if it were replaced by, another. There is pragmatic value for the increase in historical understanding of a change from one set of chronological boundaries, even if it is supported by good reasons, to another, so long as there are good intrinsic reasons for it too.

Another pragmatic reason is that a Long Middle Ages from c. 200 to c. 1700 (and later in the Islamic world) is a powerful tool for overcoming the present neglect of various large areas: philosophy in the years from the early sixth to the beginning of the ninth century in both the Greek and Latin traditions; all philosophy except that qualified as 'Renaissance' in the period from 1350-1600 in the Latin tradition (see below, 4.1), and all but those following the new science in the Latin tradition in the seventeenth century; Jewish philosophy between Crescas and Spinoza; Arabic philosophy after the thirteenth century.

noza fits at the end of the study of Jewish thinkers from the preceding eight centuries.

But perhaps the most powerful pragmatic reason is that insisting on a Long Middle Ages in philosophy will act against the neglect and marginalization that, in the Anglophone world at least, afflict the whole period it covers except for the seventeenth-century European tradition. The idea of a Long Middle Ages lays down a challenge. If you wish to look historically at Western philosophy, you must accept that the Middle Ages are, so far from being, as they are mostly regarded, a parenthesis. Rather, they are at the very centre, and indeed make up most of the story.

4 • Objections to a Long Middle Ages

There are, however, three important objections to a Long Middle Ages in philosophy. The first is that it leaves no room for Renaissance Philosophy; the second is that it gives a misleadingly homogeneous picture of the period, erasing important changes and differences; the third is that it ignores the rise of modern science.

4.1. Renaissance Philosophy

It is in fact entirely compatible with envisaging a Long Middle Ages to allow Renaissance Philosophy as a sub-period within the Latin sub-tradition. But would it be good to do so? A section or volume on 'Renaissance Philosophy' is indeed regularly placed between those on 'Medieval Philosophy' and 'Early Modern Philosophy' in *Histories* of Western Philosophy, starting sometime between 1400 and 1500 (but sometimes as early as 1300) and usually finishing c. 1600. I contend, however, that the term 'Renaissance Philosophy' does not serve well to designate any chronological period. [34]

34 See Marenbon forthcoming. Although Luca Bianchi does not criticize me for not accepting 'Renaissance Philosophy' as a period division (because he himself is urging a division 1100 – 1600), he is highly critical of the comments I make about philosophy in the Renaissance (Bianchi 2024, 401-403, cf. 411-412), which he considers to be sweeping generalizations. He is right: they are generalizations, made in the course of a broader argument, as is the following paragraph here. My forthcoming paper attempts to put the points in detail, with qualifications and answers to objections. Bianchi is also critical (402) of my consigning a number of those commonly recognized as 'Renaissance philosophers' to the margins of philosophy because they do not fit a definition of the

Although the idea of a Long Middle Ages does not in itself exclude Renaissance Philosophy, it does remove one of the reasons why historians have been encouraged to envisage it as a period: the gap between 1500, where so many want to finish the Middle Ages, and the early seventeenth century, when modern philosophy is supposed to have begun, with Descartes.

The word 'Renaissance' is very ill-suited to designate a chronological period. It brings to people's minds a cultural, artistic and intellectual movement, especially strong in Italy. It is a complex phenomenon, resistant to easy definition, but it involves a supposed revival of the ancient classical world and, where study and production of texts is concerned, it is closely linked to humanism – the placing of high value on the study of ancient Latin and Greek authors in the original languages, and the cultivation of an elegant, classical Latin style. There are a number of philosophers who can properly be described in this sense as 'Renaissance Philosophers', starting with Petrarch (1304-1374), including such figures as Nicholas of Cues, Ficino, Giovanni and Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, Bruno and ending perhaps with Montaigne (1533-1592). And these figures are, indeed, usually central in *Histories* of Renaissance Philosophy. But during the same period, especially if it is taken back to Petrarch, much was going in philosophy that had little to do with the Renaissance movement, however understood. All intellectual historians of the area now accept the importance of Aristotelianism in the period, although they tend to focus on those Aristotelians, such as Pomponazzi, who worked in Italy and were well acquainted with humanism, rather than the many thinkers in Paris and other universities who were less aware of the intellectual currents characteristic of the Renaissance. It is rather as if, because of Hegel's powerful influence at the time, the nineteenth century were to be called the 'Hegelian Period' and so historians wrote predominantly about Hegelians, even though a few philosophers of the time who were by no means Hegelians (for example, Nietzsche and Mill) were included, mainly because they were obviously too important to omit. Far better – as, of course they do – to write about

subject which, he suggests, is too narrowly based on analytic philosophy. I agree with this criticism completely. In the years since I wrote the papers to which he refers in this case, I have learned – in part from the example of scholars like him – to take a broader, indeed very broad, definition of philosophy.

nineteenth-century philosophy and recognize Hegelianism as one of the important currents within it. Far better, similarly, to write about fifteenth or sixteenth-century philosophy, and recognize Renaissance Philosophy, or, perhaps better, humanism, as one of its important strands.[35]

4.2. A misleading homogeneity

According to Luca Bianchi, the scholar who has given the closest—and most critical – attention to my arguments for a Long Middle Ages in philosophy, in my scheme

> **The category 'Middle Ages' is not really problematized, Rather, it is stretched out so as to cover fifteen centuries. It ends up becoming so comprehensive that it erases substantial differences and diminishes the importance of very pertinent changes: not just those which are generally taken to mark the end of the Middle Ages – such as the Renaissance, the Reformation and the coming of modern science – but also those internal to the Middle Ages in the current sense of the term.[36]**

My Middle Ages is, therefore, 'too homogeneous' – and Bianchi gives a list of moments of change, concentrating (after noting the difference between the contexts in which philosophy develops in the different sub-tradition) on the Latin tradition: the disappearance of the philosophers with the rise of Christianity; the *translatio studiorum* from Greek to Latin, begun

35 This is explicitly the approach in the *Routledge Handbook to Sixteenth Century Philosophy* (see Lagerlund and Hill 2017). The new *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy* (Sgarbi 2022), whilst a magnificent work of scholarship in its individual articles, is almost a *reductio ad absurdum* of the practice of using 'Renaissance Philosophy' as a period label. The volume's chronological scope is defined as 1300 – 1650, and it ranges over all four sub-traditions of broad Western philosophy, although it is hard to see what relevance the Renaissance as a movement had for Arabic philosophy (as opposed to the relevance of Arabic philosophy, usually from two or three centuries earlier, for the Renaissance as a movement). Yet, in fact, the main fourteenth-century medieval philosophers are tacitly omitted, except as influences, and even Jean Gerson, the most influential figure in the University of Paris at the turn of the fifteenth century, has no entry.
36 Bianchi 2024, 403.

in late antiquity, taken up again in the ninth century and carried forward vigorously in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the adoption of Aristotle's books of natural philosophy into the university syllabus; the new methods of analysis that grew up in the universities; the formation of the Faculties of Arts, which allowed for the reappearance of philosophers as 'culturally and socially identifiable' figures.[37]

Bianchi's objection, however, mistakes the purposes of the sort of period divisions in question here – the broad period divisions by which the whole chronological sweep of history or a discipline is divided up, as when traditionally philosophy is divided into ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary. The aim is not to capture all the significant changes but to designate an area that it is useful to look at together, in a single book or course or conference. It goes without saying that, as explained above (2.3), historians will want to make shallow sub-divisions within each broad area (and in the case of broad medieval Western philosophy, these will be peculiar to each sub-tradition). They will also want, as well or alternatively, to make divisions that are not principally chronological: for example, historians writing about Arabic philosophy before al-Ghazālī might want to divide between treatment of the *falsafa* and the *kalām* traditions, or in writing thirteenth to fifteenth-century philosophy in Europe to distinguish between university and non-university philosophy. A broad period division, such as the Middle Ages or the Long Middle Ages, is like a book rather than a chapter, a course rather than a single lecture. If, as it is very doubtful will ever happen, the academic world adopted the Long Middle Ages in philosophy, the changes to present practice would be that medieval philosophy university courses, journals, conferences, *Histories*, encyclopaedias and professional associations would observe roughly the chronology c. 200 – c. 1700, rather than, as at present, the chronology c. 500 – c. 1500. Internal distinctions, chronological and other, would remain as, or more, important than ever.

It is also worth observing that the important moments of change noted by Bianchi are biased towards one particular view of how the Latin tradition develops. Bianchi has little interest in earlier medieval philosophy (which, indeed, he wants to attach to late antiquity: see above, n.14)

37 Bianchi 2024, 403-404.

or in logic, and a predilection for philosophy that follows natural science and keeps its distance from theology, as (to some extent) in the Arts Faculties from 1250 onwards. He is not interested in the philosophizing that goes on outside the universities. These emphases are perfectly justifiable, and they have led to his own, and some other scholars', very fine work. But they become dangerous if they are used as a basis for making broad period divisions, because by providing the structure of the framework within which questions are asked, they put themselves beyond question. The very broad framework proposed by the conception of a Long Middle Ages allows for debate about its internal sub-divisions and, as for its outer boundaries, these go so strikingly against the consensus of dividing the ancient world from the medieval, and the pre-modern from modernity, that they are in no danger of being unquestioned.

4.3. Modern Science

One of the obvious questions, indeed, raised by placing the final boundary c. 1700 is whether this does not ignore the rise of modern science. Bianchi comments that the philosophy of the seventeenth century (as of many other times) was not 'a mere exercise of analysis of concepts and of arguments, but had as its task also and above all the construction of *images of the world* and *images of knowledge*'. But, he says, the way in which Descartes and Leibniz considered the world is 'totally different' from how, not just Plotinus, Boethius and Anslem, but also Aquinas, Duns Scotus 'and even Suárez' saw it. He then points to heliocentrism, a unified physics of the sub- and supra-lunar worlds, human beings' loss of their central place in the universe and a new understanding of the relationship between theory and evidence, knowing and doing, the natural and the artificial.[38]

This criticism overlooks the explicitly artificial nature, as explained above (1), of any history of *philosophy*. Historians of philosophy are picking out certain aspects of the thinking of people in the past, aspects which fit our conceptions of philosophy, broadly though they should be taken. It should, therefore, be possible to admit that in terms of scientific understanding Descartes and Scotus lived in different worlds (and hence, in

38 Bianchi 2024, 406.

History of Science, should belong to different periods), but that they lived in the same world (though by no means did they hold the same views) so far as concerns their thinking about, for example, sceptical challenges to certainty, causality and its relation to proving the existence of God, or the relations between the senses and the intellect.

Bianchi, however, would be right to take this answer as not completely adequate. Although history of philosophy is inevitably anachronistic, the historian is called upon to undo the effects of anachronism by replacing the philosophically interesting discussions within the intellectual context from which they have been rent. And it is at this point, which any *good* historian of philosophy should want to reach, that the distance between the two worlds will become evident. But is there such a distance? Descartes lived in a world where heliocentrism and a unified physics were controversial ideas and not yet the assured basis for science; a world where, as Descartes knew only too well, in 1633 Galileo was condemned. And that world changed only slowly during the course of the century lifetime. Descartes was inducted, by his education, into a world view remarkably similar to that of Aquinas and Scotus, and he spent his life striving, without complete success, to reach a radically different one. Leibniz shared the fruits of both Descartes's success and his failure, and he ended by retaining important elements of the earlier world view that Descartes had tried to discard. That is why Descartes, Leibniz and their contemporaries need, even as scientists, and certainly if they are to be envisaged in the round, as thinkers and human beings, to be seen from the perspective of the old world picture that still dominated the imagination of their times.

5 • Conclusion: an ordered anarchy

'Ordered anarchy' is an oxymoron, but it expresses well the aim of this paper, which is not to try to enforce a Long Middle Ages as the only good way of periodizing the history of philosophy, but to propose it as an option. The one approach I would like to rule out is the predominant one, where period divisions are considered meaningless, but none the less the most widely accepted ones are followed, and so a set of prejudices is brought to bear in forming the very structure of work in the field but, because they are

not open or acknowledged, they are left unscrutinized. By contrast, those who believe that they can justify deep period divisions are welcome to do so, but I am sceptical about whether they can succeed. Alternative shallow divisions, I happily agree, may well be equally valuable as the one proposed here, for different reasons. And for some approaches to the material, it may well be best to do without period divisions altogether.

The sections above have, however, given reasons why a Long Middle Ages in philosophy is worth considering, and – despite the ragged ending – is especially suitable for those who wish to take the very special opportunity afforded by studying four parallel and interrelated philosophical sub-traditions, in different languages and within different religious and political cultures. There isalso an extra side benefit, suggested by Luca Bianchi's remarks quoted near the end of the last section. He recites a number of the commonly accepted distinguishing features of modernity, such as a loss in the belief in the centrality of human beings in the universe and new ways of conceiving the relations between theory and evidence, knowing and doing, nature and artifice. Did such changes really take place at the beginning of the sixteenth century, or indeed at all? That they did has become an almost unchallengeable assumption in the History of Ideas. History of Philosophy that embraces a Long Middle Ages provides a platform from which they can be questioned.[39]

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