

*A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (vol. 2)*, ed. Kevin Gary, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

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Review of

## *A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (vol. 2)*

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The introduction to this volume makes an excellent case for its own usefulness by noting the nearly total absence of reflection on the Middle Ages and Renaissance in any prior treatments of the philosophy of education. It restates the aspiration of the entire multi-volume history (*A History of Western Philosophy of Education*) to “approach thinkers across the ages as our nonliving contemporaries” so as to expand our own vision of education (p. 2). Each chapter strives toward this laudable aim by offering reflections, usually toward the end, on what lessons we can glean from the author(s) it discusses. The volume is, however, uneven in terms of its coverage, quality, and success at achieving its stated aim of theoretical guidance from historical sources.

Before venturing any critical remarks, I will first mention a few highlights of the volume. It starts strong. Both its introduction and first chapter – on the rise of monasticism – reiterate a theme mentioned in the series introduction, namely that alongside the tradition of thinking about philosophical education as theoretical or conceptual has always been the tradition of thinking about philosophy as a way of life. Kevin Gary’s introduction emphasizes this latter aspect as especially important in monastic education, discussing especially the roles of *otium* (leisure) and *lectio divina* (meditative reading of the scriptures together with prayer). Brett Bertuccio’s first chapter on the monastic turn does so as well, emphasizing how monasteries put the classical liberal arts to work in every aspect of their liturgical activities. As he puts it, “viewing life as an anticipation of heaven, the monk pursued liberal study not to acquire tools to face challenges in a changing world, but to gradually conform himself to higher realities” (p. 41). That being said, Bertuccio also concludes his chapter with reflections from Thomas Merton on how the monasteries and contemporary universities share the same end, such that “the monastic tradition contains much to ponder and much that would enlighten our present educational sphere” (p. 46). I wholeheartedly agree; what Gary and Bertuccio say about the themes already mentioned, along with others such as the pedagogical role of silence for monks, are all deserving of further reflection.

The volume’s aim is ambitious. While a chapter on Augustine (354–430 AD) was included in the volume on antiquity, this one stretches from the beginnings of monasticism in late-Roman times to early Modernity, with Michel de Montaigne. It includes a chapter on Jewish and Islamic thought in addition to those on the Christian tradition. It also includes a chapter making an excellent case for the pervasive presence and influence of women’s voices throughout the period alongside those of men. Given this scope, striking omissions were probably inevitable. Two that stood out to me were discussions of Boethius and of medieval universities. These omissions seemed especially notable given how many of the later chapters cited Boethius’s lasting influence, and the volume’s heavy emphasis throughout on the settings in which education took place during the period it covers. Monasteries, cathedral schools, Talmudic schools, the Renaissance *studia humanitatis*, and Jesuit schools – to name a few – all receive detailed treatment, while little is said about the establishment of the universities or what went on in them. A natural place to fill this gap might have been the chapter on Thomas Aquinas, who spent time at the universities of Naples, Cologne, and Paris.

A general complaint about the essays in this volume is that too little attention is devoted to reflection on theoretical issues, or the lessons that can be drawn from them today. An example is the contrast between learning in the schools and in the monasteries. Gary writes that “the scholastic approach to learning ... stood in sharp contrast to monastic learning” and that “monks regarded with distrust the dialectical methods of scholastics” (p. 10). Bertuccio likewise notes that “whereas the monastic emphasis on rhetoric led to poetic elucidations of faith written to stir up the heart, the scholastic mode of knowing prized impervious logical proofs of doctrinal truths” (p. 33). For in Constant Mews’s chapter on 12th-century scholasticism, Abelard features as a schoolman *par excellence*, someone whose work “illuminates one key aspect of educational philosophy and practice in the twelfth century, namely the value attached to subjecting religious faith to reason and a critical assessment of authority” (p. 55). It may well be that there are significant differences between scholasticism and monasticism well worth exploring, and that some of these involve the use of reason *vis-à-vis* faith. But many if not most scholastics were monks too, and one cannot possibly read works by Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, or various others typically considered scholastics without realizing that they share the same goal of inner transformation that characterized the work in monasteries. Furthermore, when it comes to “logical proofs of doctrinal truths” or “subjecting religious faith to reason,” the respective roles of faith and reason in scholastic writings is a complex and subtle matter. Abelard, for instance, wrote not only against “anti-dialecticians” like Bernard of Clairvaux who thought reasoning played no role in expositing matters of faith, but also against those whom he called “pseudo-dialecticians,” like his erstwhile teacher Roscelin, who allotted to reason too elevated a role. Pinning down Abelard’s precise view, along with those of other medieval scholastics, is difficult. But it is theoretically important in terms of what it can teach us about the respective roles of faith and reason in education today. The shortage of attention to theoretical nuances like these certainly points to an opportunity for future scholars.

Instead, most chapters devote a great deal of attention to biographical details that can in many cases easily be found elsewhere. These occupy, for instance, a large part of the aforementioned Aquinas chapter, which omits discussion of Aquinas’s questions on education in his *De Veritate*, or of important pedagogical issues such as the innovative role of the *Summa Theologiae* – something discussed elsewhere by Leonard Boyle, Brian Davies, and others. The same is true, unfortunately, of Carrie Cammarano’s otherwise excellent chapter on women writers and education. Here the biography serves an important purpose – at least for me – introducing readers to little-known figures such as Hrosvitha of Gandersheim, the first Latin dramatist of the Middle Ages. I wanted to know more about the educational roles played by Hrosvitha’s comic hagiographies, as opposed to other media of the time. The same goes for the books of visions recorded by mystics like Hildegard of Bingen; I would have liked to hear more about the educational roles of visionary literature alongside more “standard” works of monks or schoolmen. But the chapter discusses three other figures too, and hence cannot devote much time to theoretical issues.

An exception is the discussion in chapter 3 – on Jewish and Muslim voices – of the Jewish concept of *Torah lishmah*, or “study for its own sake.” Here the authors, Gad Marcus and Yusef Waghid, do an excellent job of drawing out what it might mean to study the Torah for its own sake, how “the act of studying was and still is considered to be a way of worship within the Jewish community,” and how the concept of *lishmah* functioned in Maimonides’s educational practices (pp. 80–83). This is a good example of the sort of fruitful theoretical engagement with the tradition that I would have liked to read more of in the volume. Unfortunately, the chapter’s companion piece on Muslim voices is not as helpful, in that (rather oddly) it discusses no medieval Muslim figures at all – not even al-Farabi, renowned in the tradition as “the second teacher” after Aristotle. So this chapter, like the volume, is uneven. But there are enough tantalizing suggestions here to show that the volume’s overall aim is worth pursuing further.

## About the Author

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