

Philosophy In The Late Latin West¹

1. Introduction

Here I will offer an account of the emergence, in the late antique Latin west and thereafter, of a new conception of philosophy as primarily related to the meanings of texts, a conception that replaced the idea that philosophy was primarily an autonomous way of life. That philosophy was conceived throughout antiquity as essentially a way of life has been well established by Pierre Hadot,² and this view has now become standard in scholarship on the bigger picture in the history of philosophy. See for instance Marrone in the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy* citing Hadot for “the compelling recent statement of the case”,³ and Marenbon in his *Medieval Philosophy: an Historical and Philosophical Introduction*, stating “In antiquity, philosophy was not one academic subject among others: it was a way of life”.⁴

Earlier insightful commentators on ancient thinkers were aware of this distinction before Hadot, for instance Markus in the *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (1967), who says of Augustine: “although he was content to speak of Christianity as ‘philosophy’, he also used the term ‘philosophy’ in a narrower, technical sense akin to that of modern usage”.⁵ The sense in which even Christianity can be called *philosophia* is of course the ubiquitous older sense of a way of life.⁶ In his recent book *Philosophy in the Roman Empire* Michael Trapp observes “It may not be either particularly fair or particularly illuminating to judge practitioners of *philosophia* by the standards of ‘philosophy’”.⁷

The new textual conception of philosophy took a long time to replace the older understanding. Later writers, particularly in the Stoic tradition, continue to present philosophy in the old way. Even within the Neoplatonic

schools of late antiquity it is clear from biographical material that, notwithstanding the focus there on texts, philosophy was considered as a comprehensive approach to life involving ascetic discipline, religious worship and theurgy, and was still not regarded as exclusively a literary-intellectual activity or product.⁸

Elsewhere I argue for the importance of the reception of Cicero's philosophical works, and the confirmatory effect of some of his own remarks about philosophy, for the later transformation that occurred in the way it was conceived and practised.⁹ There were of course other factors at work in this transformation: from the beginning Greek philosophers had themselves produced texts, many of which circulated outside schools; again, the Hellenistic schools by the first century BC were already being dispersed or disbanded;¹⁰ and moreover Roman *mores* among the educated aristocracy at this time seem to have been fairly resistant to the abandonment of a traditional Roman social role, and in particular resistant to the adoption of the role of a "professional" philosopher.¹¹ All these factors dating from Cicero's time or before are relevant to the subsequent change in the Latin tradition, but I want to concentrate here on the later evidence for the fact of this change, and its closer causes.

My aim here is to infer when and how the textual conception of philosophy arose during late antiquity in the Latin west, eventually to replace the older sense of philosophy as a way of life. Three important elements in this were the disappearance of competence in Greek language in the Latin west; the cultural form in which Greek philosophical developments were accepted into the Latin tradition; and the influence of Christianity.

2. *The Loss of Knowledge of Greek in the Western Empire*

By the middle of the fourth century AD knowledge of Greek in the western empire, which had previously been a standard feature of Roman education, was in serious decline and almost totally extinct within a further century.¹² Detailed surveys by Pierre Courcelle and subsequently McGuire of Roman writers in the west (i.e., central and northern Italy including Rome, Gaul, Spain and Africa) show that from the second half of the fourth century onwards the ability even to read Greek became limited to members of a very few old aristocratic families who maintained Roman cultural tradition by keeping private tutors, and to the increasingly rare individuals who learnt Greek while living in the east.¹³ By contrast, the Greek taught in schools was elementary, hardly ever used and usually forgotten by adulthood.

At the same time translations into Latin of Greek philosophical works became increasingly common. Cicero had translated Plato's *Protagoras* and part of the *Timaeus*, and Apuleius in the second century AD the *Phaedo*, but translations of three further kinds of philosophical works began to appear about the middle of the fourth century, of Aristotelian logic, recent Neoplatonic metaphysics and histories of philosophical opinions.¹⁴

In the case of logic, before his conversion (c.354 AD) Marius Victorinus translated Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Aristotle's *Categories* and *de Interpretatione*, while Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (d. 385) translated Themistius' paraphrases of Aristotle's *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, and probably produced the *Decem Categoriae*, possibly a translation of a Greek work.¹⁵ Earlier works in Latin synthesising Aristotelian and Stoic logic were Aelius Stilo's lost treatise, the book on dialectic in his student Varro's lost *Nine Disciplines* and Apuleius' *Peri Hermeneias*, on which Bk 4 of Martianus

Capella's *Marriage of Philology and Mercury* (early c.5 AD) drew, and subsequently there are Boethius' translations of the whole Aristotelian *Organon* and Porphyry's *Isagoge* with commentaries (early c.6 AD), and Cassiodorus' *Institutes* 2.3 (later c.6 AD).

In metaphysics Marius Victorinus translated some of Plotinus' *Enneads*, possibly with commentary by Porphyry, and probably other works of Porphyry such as the *de Regressu animae*.¹⁶ In addition at some point (perhaps c.350 AD) the partial translation of the *Timaeus* by Calcidius with commentary appeared. This process culminated in Boethius' plan at the beginning of the sixth century to translate and comment upon the whole of Plato and Aristotle,¹⁷ fulfilled only partially, as mentioned, for Aristotle's *Organon* (with Porphyry's *Isagoge*). The demand for these translations is evidence of the general loss of direct access to Greek philosophy among educated Latin speakers from the fourth century onwards.

3. *The Absence of Latin Philosophical Schools in Antiquity*

There is no evidence of any major philosophical school teaching in Latin at any time during the empire, and perhaps there was no formal teaching of philosophy in Latin at all, apart from the case of dialectic, which I will discuss shortly. The Neoplatonist circle in Milan to which Augustine belonged cannot be called a philosophical school in the Greek sense insofar as its main members (Ambrose, Simplicianus, Manlius Theodorus) subscribed to Christianity as their way of life.¹⁸ Only Maximus of Madaura seems to have thought differently, when he complains to Augustine, *vir eximie, qui a mea secta deviasti* ('You distinguished man, you who departed from my school').¹⁹

The subscription to the poetry of Sedulius (c. 425–450 AD), *in Italia philosophiam didicit* ('he taught philosophy in Italy'), bears no particular

weight.²⁰ With regard to fifth-century Gaul, Britain has shown that the work of Claudianus Mamertus provides no evidence of a philosophical school.²¹ Finally, in his survey of sites of late ancient pagan spiritual teaching Fowden cannot name any other western locations apart from Rome.²²

This evidence all more or less accords with the observation by R.R. Bolgar in 1958 on the absence of trained professional teachers of philosophy in the Latin west. He writes

a grammarian would lecture on philosophy when he came across a philosophical passage in an author, much after the style of Macrobius' commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis*. If he did this well, if he was interested and made full use of his opportunities, he would earn the title of a philosopher.²³

If this is all correct, the preconditions for an exclusively textual approach to philosophy in the Latin west are already present by the end of the fourth century.

This can be correlated with wider cultural developments. Mark Vessey asserts that a

collective articulation of a Latin Christian textual culture that had been set in train by the great masters of the later fourth and early fifth centuries had a momentum and visible direction of its own long before Cassiodorus,

observing that the latter's *Institutes* (of the mid-to-late sixth century) is "uniquely redolent of the *new world of texts*" (his emphasis).²⁴ Placing developments in philosophy in the context of the increasing cultural authority of Christianity is, I think, the key to understanding the end of philosophy as a way of life, as I will argue in the next section.

But first I need to say something about the case of dialectic, which was taught formally, and presumably orally, in a scholastic setting. The separation of logic from ethics and physics, as the culmination of a Latin rhetorical education, again suggests that by contrast the rest of philosophy was not conceived as an oral discipline in the later Latin tradition.

Augustine came upon Aristotle's *Categories* as the pinnacle of his rhetorical training (*Conf.* 4.28), no doubt in Marius Victorinus' translation. Victorinus had taught rhetoric in Rome using Cicero's *de Inventione* as his textbook, followed by Cicero's *Topics*, on both of which he produced commentaries; his own works on hypothetical syllogisms and definitions, and his translations of logical works by Porphyry and Aristotle were clearly meant to be used in his school.²⁵ Since Victorinus was a teacher of rhetoric, he presumably did not teach the metaphysical texts of Plotinus and Porphyry he translated. This isolation of dialectic from philosophy as a part, or sister-art, of rhetoric²⁶ can be traced through the developing conception of the liberal arts in Latin literature, from Cicero and Varro to Cassiodorus,²⁷ by way of Seneca, Quintilian, Augustine and Martianus Capella.²⁸

4. *The Role of Christianity*

Despite their lack of direct access to the practice of philosophy as a way of life, resulting from the demise of fluency in Greek and the absence of Latin philosophical schools, Romans in the late west could not yet be said to be unaware of that possibility. So long as the Greek Neoplatonist schools in the east remained active, and continued to influence western ideas through the medium of translation, philosophy undoubtedly continued to be conceived in the old sense, if not so practised. Even in late-fifth century Gaul the Christian

Faustus' disdain for philosophers, as opposed to philosophical thought, indicates the survival of this idea.²⁹

The key development here is the conflict between philosophy, in the old sense, as a distinctly pagan ethos, and Christianity. It seems likely that it was the role of the Christian church at the end of antiquity to seal off the possibility of pursuing philosophy as an autonomous way of life. Thus it became thereafter either merely a literary-intellectual adjunct to religion, or at most a purely theoretical pursuit, and the church alone retained the authority to prescribe and embody a way of life.

This perhaps occurred in two related ways: firstly, the Neoplatonist school in Athens disappeared, either as an eventual result of the edicts of Justinian of 529 and probably 531 AD (*Cod. Just.* 1.5.18.4 and 1.11.10.2), or at the latest by the time of the Slavonic invasions (c. 580 AD).³⁰ In any case, with the cessation of the oral dimension of independent Neoplatonic teaching there was an end to the practical autonomy of philosophy within the empire as a "spiritual vision". The school in Alexandria accommodated to Christianity from the late fifth or early sixth century AD. Under Olympiodorus it seems to have restricted itself to innocuous textual exegesis and eventually ceased teaching Plato (moving to Constantinople in 610). Contemporaneous with this are the beginnings of Syriac textual work on Aristotle, but there was a clear break until after 750 AD before Arabic philosophy (in the medieval sense) emerged.³¹

Secondly, more generally in the west, Latin Christian philosophy developed the role of "handmaiden to faith".³² The originally autonomous spiritual vision of Neoplatonism as a way of life, the only prominent form of philosophy in late antiquity, became assimilated to and appropriated by

Christianity, as is evidenced for instance in the case of Augustine's conversion.³³ This is strikingly confirmed by Cassiodorus (c.490–c.590 AD) in a series of definitions of philosophy borrowed from Neoplatonists (*Inst.* 2.3.5).³⁴ The first three are consistent with a textual conception of philosophy, but the fourth, of philosophy as a preparation for dying (*meditatio mortis*), derived from Plato's *Phaedo* (e.g., 64a, 67e), and repeated by Cicero at *Tusc.* 1.74, clearly represents the older view of a way of life; Cassiodorus immediately appropriates this calling it "better suited to Christians" (*quod magis convenit Christianis*). Following the demise of Latin philosophical writing after Cassiodorus there was a break, corresponding to but longer than that in the east, before the Carolingian revival at the end of the eighth century AD.³⁵

John Marenbon concludes from the study of Carolingian texts,

the three ways in which philosophy would take place in the Latin world up to about 1200 are already evident: in the form of, and in thinking stimulated by, logic; in presenting and analysing Christian doctrine; and — so Alcuin's use of the *Confessions* and the citation of Chalcidius among his followers hint — in connection with a small group of ancient philosophical works, which would come properly into use, along with a wider range of logical texts in the following century.³⁶

This analysis makes clear by omission that by the time of Charlemagne the conception of philosophy as a way of life has completely disappeared in the west, replaced by a conception that locates it exclusively in the meaning of designated texts and methods of reasoning about them and about Christian doctrine. Subsequently, as a secular pursuit in modernity, academic

philosophy has for long been reconceived almost exclusively as the realm of intellectual justification, or more generally abstract inquiry.³⁷

5. *Conclusion*

The post-antique future of philosophy, in this transformed sense, as no longer primarily a way of life, depended on the survival and revival in western Europe of practices of reading, interpreting, emulating and innovating upon classical Latin texts, in particular Latin philosophical texts, beyond the closure of the later Greek schools in the east. I should say here that I do not mean to deny the importance of Arabic philosophy, merely to say that later Latinate medieval and modern philosophy would not have developed as they did without the survival of the Latin tradition in the form it took. Without the responsiveness of this western tradition of philosophical reading and writing, medieval Arabic philosophical texts and ideas would not have had the influence they did beyond their own culture.

In this Latin tradition we can trace the evolution of a new understanding of the nature of philosophy, as primarily a matter of the meanings of certain texts and the intellectual evaluation of the claims and arguments of such texts. I have argued here that this conception is already indirectly suggested by practices in the late fourth century and became definitive with the late eighth century Carolingian revival, having been able to survive the general domination of Christianity in late European antiquity over intellectual and moral life, in a manner in which the older conception of philosophy as an autonomous way of life was not.

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Notes

¹ This paper is based on one section of my article “Cicero and Philosophy as Text”, forthcoming in the *Classical Journal* 106 (2010-11). I thank the editor of the latter for permission to publish this paper here.

² Hadot (2002), e.g. 2–5, and *passim*; and Hadot (1995) ch.10.

³ Marrone (2003) 11–12, with n.1.

⁴ Marenbon (2007) 7; cf. Bénatouïl (2006) 421, 424.

⁵ Markus (1967) 345.

⁶ Hadot (2002) 23 dates the emergence of “the idea or concept of philosophy”, in the ancient sense of a way of life, to the schools founded by the various followers of Socrates, but whether or not the Pythagoreans used the term (for refs. see Hadot (2002) 15 n.1), their school surely anticipates the phenomenon. Hadot (2002) 9 rightly notes that the identification of the other presocratics as “philosophers” stems only from Aristotle (who seeks to locate his own conception of “first philosophy”, i.e., a life devoted to *theoria* of the first principles of nature, as the fulfilment of anticipations by the *physikoi*).

⁷ Trapp (2007) p. xiii, and cf. ch.1. generally.

⁸ See, e.g., generally Fowden (1982); on theurgy Shaw (1995) 4–5 and *passim*; Edwards (2000) for the biographies of Plotinus and Proclus; and especially Hadot (2002) ch.8 with refs. I make no claim here for or against Hadot’s interpretation of ancient philosophical texts themselves as evidence, and material, for “spiritual exercises” constituting the core of philosophical activity in antiquity, for which see Hadot (1995) chs.1–2 and 4; or Hadot (2002) ch.9, esp. pp. 179–211 and cf. pp. 122–6, 135–9, 144–5. My concern here is with the reformulation of the referent of the term “philosophy” (*philosophia*, primarily in Latin) as the *significatum* of a text, or the activity of apprehending or evaluating that *significatum* by mediation of the text (reading, interpretation and criticism); the reading or related reflection might or might not be construed as a spiritual exercise.

⁹ See note 1 above.

¹⁰ On the end or dispersal of the Hellenistic schools see briefly e.g., Bénatouïl (2006) 418; or Trapp (2007) x; and in more detail Lynch (1972) 161–2, 180–2, 189–93, 197–207; and Glucker (1978) 373–9 and generally chs.5–8.

¹¹ See, e.g., *de Orat.* 1.221–2, *Tac. Ag.* 4. As against Quintus Lucilius Balbus, depicted as a full-time Stoic in *N.D.* (see 1.15), we should weigh, e.g., the model of Marcus Porcius Cato the younger (interlocutor in *Fin.* 3–4), first and foremost an active Roman politician, and only then a Stoic, Marcus Junius Brutus (author of a *de Virtute*, and dedicatee of *N.D.*, *Tusc.*, *Fin.*, see esp. 1.8 and 3.6), a follower of Antiochus, and Gaius Aurelius Cotta (*N.D.*, see 3.5) as an Academic, and even the Epicureans Gaius Velleius, a senator (*N.D.*, see 1.15) and Lucius Manlius Torquatus (*Fin.* 1–2). Cf. also Marcus Varro (*Ac.* 1), another Antiochean (1.7, *Fam.* 9.8.1, *Aug. C.D.* 19.1–3), and some of the characters of *Fin.* 5 (Marcus Pupius Piso Calpurnianus and Cicero’s brother Quintus, also in *Leg.* and *Div.*); on the other hand Atticus and Lucretius, as Epicureans, do seem to have made philosophical commitments to avoid political life. The role of the *professional* philosopher no doubt seemed to the Roman elite to be a Greek, and therefore servile, life choice (Cicero and many contemporaries supporting such people in their own households: see *N.D.* 1.6; Cicero was host to the Stoic Diodotus from 84–59 BC).

¹² See McGuire (1959) esp. 13–17; Courcelle (1969) esp. 142–8 (Italy in c.5 AD), 208–23 (Africa); and, contra the claims of Courcelle 238–70 for a renaissance of Greek in late fifth-century Gaul associated with Sidonius Apollinaris and Mamertus Claudianus, see Brittain (2001) esp. 259. Cf. Marrou (1956) 255–64 on the initial development of a literature in Latin, in the ages of Cicero and Augustus, as a key factor in the decline of Roman Hellenism in the west; the later development of a Christian Latin literature, particularly that of Augustine, was also important in the late period: see McGuire (1959) 11–12.

¹³ On Augustine’s late learning of Greek see Courcelle (1969) 149–65; and, more sceptically, McGuire (1959) 15.

¹⁴ For references to these see Courcelle (1969) 134–5 with n.37, 140–1, 231 with n.47, 256–8; and Brittain (2001) 243.

¹⁵ See Hadot (1971), ch.10; Gersh (1986) 7–16; and more briefly Bianchi and Cacouros (2000); and Falcon (2008).

¹⁶ See Courcelle (1969) ch.4.2, esp. 171–89; Hadot (1971), ch.12; and Brittain (2001) 259.

¹⁷ Boethius *de Interp. ed. sec.* Meisner p. 79.9, as quoted by Courcelle (1969) 277 n.32.

¹⁸ See further Courcelle (1969) 182–3, 231; and Hadot (1971) 204.

¹⁹ *Ep. ad Aug.* 16.4, *PL* 33, 82, of 390 AD, cited by Courcelle (1969) 181.

²⁰ See Courcelle (1969) 141 n.1.

²¹ Brittain (2001) esp. 244 and 260.

²² Fowden (1982) 38–48; for Rome see p. 40.

²³ Bolgar (1958) 36.

²⁴ Vessey in Halporn (2004) 37.

²⁵ See Hadot (1971) Pt 3, esp. 195–6.

²⁶ See Hadot (1971) 191: “La ‘dialectique’ a été d’abord à Rome une discipline d’inspiration stoïcienne, intimement liée à la rhétorique”; cf. p. 195; and also Ramelli (2008).

²⁷ Cassiodorus *Inst.* 2.3.4–7 prefaces his summary of dialectic by treating it as part of philosophy, but in doing so he borrows directly from recent Greek Neoplatonism, as the parallels from Ammonius quoted by Halporn (2004) 189–90 ns.88–95 show; and see Vessey in Halporn (2004) 72–4 and further refs. p. 85 on his sources. By contrast, the texts Cassiodorus prescribes for the study of dialectic (*Inst.* 2.3.18, cf. 8–17) are the standard translations and original works of the Latin tradition, supplemented by Boethius’ recent commentaries.

²⁸ The origin of this conception is clearly the Greek idea of an *enkyklios paideia*; just when it developed into the form in which it was transmitted to the Middle Ages as the *trivium* and *quadrivium* is partly a matter of definition, partly of interpretation, but there is a real question whether Porphyry’s conception had an influence on Latin writers from Augustine on. See Ilsetraut Hadot (2005) *passim*, and p. 100 for Porphyry’s role, followed by Vessey in Halporn (2004) 65, and cf. Gwynn (1926) 82–92, finding the standard seven subjects first in Cicero’s *de Orat.* (p. 84); and similarly Marrou (1956) 177; on Martianus Capella see Stahl et al. (1977) 232; and on Cassiodorus Vessey in Halporn (2004) 64–79. On the significance of the inclusion of logic see Bolgar (1958) 36–7 and Ramelli (2008).

²⁹ See Brittain (2001) 247 with n.45; and cf. the letter from Eucherius to Valerian of 432 (*PL* 50, 724A, cited in Courcelle (1969) 231 n.46).

³⁰ Cf. Malalas *Chronicle* 18.47, Agathias 2.30-1, with Watts (2004) 179-80 on the dating of the decrees. For doubt about the significance of Justinian’s measure see Cameron (1969); followed by Lynch (1972) 163–9, cf. p. 177; and Glucker (1978) 322–9; but for a recent defence of their effect see Watts (2004); and for an extended bibliography Wildberg (2005) 330 n.39.

³¹ See Wildberg (2005) 322–4 on philosophical activity outside the schools in the east (324: “philosophical inquiry and debate, understood as a search for the truth, never ceased to be of central concern”, despite the marginalisation of the “pagan sage” as a type: i.e., philosophy continued but not as a way of life), and pp. 325 and 333–6 on the Alexandrian school; and Marenbon (2007) 56–60 generally on the period, and the break before Arabic philosophy.

³² Cf. Hadot (2002) 253–61 with further references; and Marrone (2003) esp. 16–18, 43, 45–6. The conception behind the expression *philosophia ancilla theologiae* began with Philo (see e.g., *Congr.* 14.79–80), from whom it was adopted by ancient Christian writers (see e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.5, *PG* 8, 721A–724A) and attained its classic formulation with the medieval Peter Damian (*de Divina omnipotentia* 5, *PL* 145, 603C–D, *velut ancilla dominae*); see further Wolfson (1948) 1.145–57.

³³ See *Conf.* 7.9.13, 7.20, 8.1.2, 8.2.3, 8.8.19; cf. *de Beata vita* 1.4. For the clearly similar conversion of Marius Victorinus see Hadot (1971) ch.15.

³⁴ See Courcelle (1969) 342–3; and Halporn (2004) 190 ns.92–5.

³⁵ See Marenbon (2007) 46–7 and 70–72.

³⁶ Marenbon (2007) 72; cf. Bolgar (1958) 133. In addition to the recovery of the *logica vetus*, on Latin Platonist texts available from this time forth see Klibansky (1981) 21–9 (noting p. 22 the importance of Cicero as a source for knowledge of Plato); supplemented by Gersh (1986) 22–23; and on the evidence of medieval study of Cicero’s philosophical works see Bolgar (1958) 197 and 249; and Gersh (1986) 787–96, 806 and n.123.

³⁷ Hadot (2002) 261–70 also documents repeated occasional recognitions since antiquity of the potential of philosophy to define a way of life, while Marenbon (2007) 7 states “The contrast between ancient philosophy as a way of life and philosophy in later centuries is not, however, absolute. And, in the Middle Ages, at certain moments, for certain thinkers, philosophy — as distinct from theology, and in spite of institutional structures — did seem to offer, as it had done to the ancients, a way of life”, but he provides no further explanation of his first claim, and the qualifications in the second make clear that he acknowledges that in the medieval period what was generally called philosophy was indeed something quite different from the norm in antiquity.