PHILOSOPHY 656   Medieval Philosophy: Nominalism and Realism   WINTER 2020
Stephen Menn & Calvin Normore   meeting roughly every <u>second</u> week:
                                                              M 11:30-2:30, Leacock 927
                                                              T 11:30-2:00, Birks 111

   McGill often offers graduate seminars on Arabic medieval philosophy, but this is apparently
the first seminar on Latin medieval philosophy that we have offered since Fall 2011. Normore,
emeritus at McGill and teaching at UCLA, is one of the leading contemporary scholars of Latin
medieval philosophy. This is the first time he has come back to teach at McGill since his
retirement; he will fly to Montreal roughly every second week, so we will have weeks with two
meetings (totaling about five hours) and weeks with no meetings. Normore and Menn are writing
a book together on nominalism and realism in medieval Latin philosophy, and will be trying out
their ideas for it on the class as we work through a selection of the primary texts in translation.
   There was a major controversy between nominalists and realists in the late 11th and throughout
the 12th century. Most philosophers of the time are realists, but there are also nominalists, most
prominently Roscelin of Compiègne and Peter Abelard, and the realists devote much effort to
refuting the nominalists (and Abelard to refuting Roscelin as well as the realists). The
participants themselves sometimes describe themselves, and their opponents, as nominalists and
realists (or by closely related terms): more precisely, Abelard and his school are referred to as
"nominalists," Roscelin and his school as "vocalists." There are no identifiable nominalists for
(almost) the whole 13th century; the few 13th century references to nominalists are always to a
now extinct school. Then, from early in the 14th century, there are again nominalists, most
prominently William Ockham and Adam Wodeham and John Buridan, and there are
controversies between them and the realists, although also controversies within each side.
Apparently no one uses the words "nominalist" and "realist" to describe these opposing ways of
philosophy until perhaps the last decade of the 14th century, but by the early 15th century
philosophers are widely using these words, for themselves and their allies and opponents, and for
past philosophers including Ockham. At some universities there were institutional schisms
between teachers and students belonging to the "ancient way" or "way of the realists" and those
belonging to the "modern way" or "way of the nominalists." Sometimes philosophers of this time
also refer back to the nominalists of the 11th-12th century, and it is a strong possibility that the
word "nominalist" was first revived by realists who wanted to smear their opponents by
association with the old nominalists, and was then defiantly accepted by their opponents.
   Students should not assume that they already know what nominalism was (say on the basis of
20th-21st century uses), or what the nominalist-realist controversy was about. The professors are
currently trying to find that out. It is currently disputed among scholars of medieval philosophy
what the controversy between the nominalists and realists was about, and even whether there was
such a controversy. We will look both at the medieval disputes themselves and at medieval
philosophers' descriptions of themselves and of their opponents. It is clear that by the 15th
century there were self-described realists and nominalists, and many issues disputed between the
two "ways." What is controversial is how far these labels are applicable to earlier periods (and
whether there is any connection between the 12th-century and 14th-15th-century disputes), and
whether the many particular disagreements can be reduced to some fundamental issue. We are
given long lists of disputed issues, but <u>a priori</u> it is possible that there were just two social groups
in the 15th-century universities who happened to disagree on lots of different issues.

In the scholarly discussion over the last 100 years or so, there have been three main views about what, if anything, the nominalist-realist controversy was about. (i) An old-fashioned view was the dispute was about <u>universals</u>, whether they are merely names or real things; (ii) another old-fashioned view was that the nominalists, at least in the 14th and 15th centuries, were radical theological <u>voluntarists</u>, who held that God could falsify any purported universal law of nature, and who therefore sceptically withdrew from universal assertions; (iii) a currently popular view is that 15th-century nominalists and realists were just two social groups who disagreed on lots of different issues, and that earlier nominalist-realist controversies are back-projections from the 15th century. Answers (i) and (ii) are clearly wrong, and answer (iii) is a counsel of despair and misrepresents the medieval evidence. Against (i), while the nominalists and realists do disagree about universals, they also disagree about dozens of other issues, ranging from semantics to Eucharistic theology, which cannot be reduced to the issue of universals. Against (ii), while Ockham and later nominalists do use voluntarist arguments ("what if God did X …") for some nominalist conclusions, the most radical theological voluntarist of the 14th century was a realist, Thomas Bradwardine, and the nominalists have no trouble at all asserting universal scientific propositions. Against (iii), we need to take seriously medieval philosophers' own descriptions of their philosophical programs, and of how they see the different issues as connected; and even though 14th-century authors do not describe themselves as nominalists or realists, they are aware of a fundamental gap between two approaches to philosophy and have various descriptions for it, even if some individual figures (notably Peter John Olivi and Peter Aureoli) are hard to classify.

The view that Normore and Menn are trying out is that the fundamental difference between nominalists and realists was in semantics, the theory of signification and other "properties of terms" and especially the theory of truth-conditions of sentences. The realist view is that, in the normal case a true sentence is true because it corresponds to reality, in the strong sense that there is a structural correspondence between how the constituents of the proposition are related and how the real objects they stand for are related. This will work out differently in affirmative and negative sentences, existentially or universally quantified sentences, tensed or modal sentences, conditionals, and so on, and there are also many deviant special cases where a sentence can be true without such structural correspondence. The nominalists, in different ways, reject this picture. In particular, Ockham and Buridan think that, in the basic case of a sentence "A is B," the sentence is true because the subject and predicate terms stand for the same real object, without any corresponding structure in reality; there will be more complicated accounts of more complex sentences, and the nominalists too have to admit deviant special cases (where sentences include "connotative terms"). Both the nominalists and the realists base themselves on versions of the theory of "properties of terms," a distinctively medieval contribution to logic (going far beyond anything in Aristotle) describing how terms function in different propositional contexts, and how they contribute to the truth-conditions of propositions and the validity-conditions of inferences. This theory, starting from obscure beginnings in St. Anselm and also in the grammarians, reaches a classical form in the 13th century with William of Sherwood and Peter of Spain, and is transformed in the early 14th century by Walter Burley and William of Ockham. During the semester we will move (i) back and forth between medieval descriptions of nominalism and realism and particular nominalist-realist disputes; (ii) forward from the 11th-12th to the 14th-15th centuries, with a stop in the 13th century for the theory of properties of terms; (iii) back and forth between the core semantic issues and the many "branch" disputes in many areas of medieval philosophy and theology to which some medieval philosophers applied their semantic theories. Disputed topics include, for instance, universals, wholes and parts, relations,

numbers, continuous quantities, indivisible boundaries, artifacts, past and future things, truth, propositional objects, powers, future contingents, and Trinitarian and Eucharistic theology. We will touch on as many of these as we can, and will encourage students to explore others in their term-papers.

We will meet on the following days:

Monday January 6 (without Normore)
Monday-Tuesday January 20-21
Monday-Tuesday February 3-4
Monday-Tuesday February 17-18
Monday-Tuesday February 24-25
Monday-Tuesday March 9-10
Monday-Tuesday March 23-24

We meet Mondays in Leacock 927 and Tuesdays in Birks 111. Tuesday classes will end at 2pm; Monday classes will go the full 11:30-2:30 period, but with a break in the middle.

The course is intended for philosophy graduate students and senior honours and joint-honours students at McGill, and the equivalent at the other Montreal universities; others should consult with the professors. The normal prerequisite is a course on Aristotle, Philosophy 355 at McGill or the equivalent elsewhere, as long as the course discussed Aristotle's logic and theoretical philosophy and not just his ethics and politics; students without that background should consult with the professors, and if necessary we will recommend catch-up reading. In particular, students who have not read Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione, or who do not have a clear memory of them, should read Categories chapters 1-9 and De Interpretatione chapters 1-8 before Monday January 20 (Ackrill's translation, reprinted in various forms and included in Barnes' Complete Works of Aristotle, which is available electronically through the McGill library, is recommended). There is no language prerequisite except that some readings may be assigned in French. But you will have to listen to discussions of some Latin words and of Latin sentence-structure; some basic Latin would be a help. Failing that, knowledge of another inflected language such as Greek or Arabic would be an advantage.

Students from the Institute of Islamic Studies working on Arabic philosophy are very welcome in the course, if they have the necessary background in Aristotle. Auditors are welcome, as long as they identify themselves, sign up on the course's iversity site (see below), have the necessary background, do all the readings and fully participate in seminar, including doing handouts (see below).

There are no required books for the course, i.e. no books that you have to buy. There will be many required readings, but they will be posted on the course's iversity site (see below). The assignment for each week will be given on iversity ahead of time. You must do each day's reading carefully, before the class for which it is assigned, have it in class with you and be ready to discuss it and answer questions about it. It would be a very good idea to do the reading for both the Monday class and the Tuesday class before Monday. Lectures and discussions will be unintelligible and pointless without the readings—do not come to class if you have not been able to do the readings. We will not tolerate purely passive presence, from students or auditors.

All students and auditors must sign up for the course on iversity, http://un.iversity.org , on the first day of class, so that they can receive reading assignments and any other messages for the

course. We will announce each day's reading assignment on iversity, and will post copies of the texts themselves for download. We will also use iversity to ask for volunteers to prepare handouts on the next day's readings, if we have not already done this in the previous class; please volunteer by posting a reply on iversity.

Grades will be based on a 20-25 page research term-paper due on the last day of class (60%), on class participation (20%), and on written outlines and analyses of the arguments of particular texts (20%): we will ask each student some appropriate number of times (depending on class size) during the term to prepare such an analysis and to copy it and distribute it in class as an aid to discussion. The class participation mark depends on serious active participation in discussions, and may involve leading discussion of some topics as requested. You should pick a topic for the term-paper early in the term, in consultation with the instructors, and be working on it concurrently with the course. To receive a passing grade for the course, students must show that they have kept up with the readings and are able to discuss them in class. In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill requires us to add the following paragraph: "McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest for more information)."

Stephen Menn's office is Leacock 921; he will be available there Wednesdays from 4:00 to 6:00, and can often be reached in the evenings at his office phone number, 398-7452.