MEDIEVAL COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

[1] The Goal: To sketch the status of philosophical psychology in the High Middle Ages, with attention to areas of exploration and dispute, and how distinct positions, broadly understood, evolved in the debates. The framework was given by Aristotle’s *De anima*, translated several times and eventually adopted as part of the university curriculum.

[2] Two types of challenge to psychology as a branch of natural science (*scientia*: more generally as an organized body of knowledge): (a) theological problems, such as the unclear status of the soul’s postmortem existence and whether human psychology could be studied scientifically; (b) philosophical problems, such as how it could be continuous with the rest of physics and distinct from biology, whether it has a unified subject, and the like. Note that Aristotle does not describe the soul in terms of ‘faculties’ nor have a separate discussion of emotions and choice (*i.e.* does not clearly have a conception of affective psychology).

[3] The Neo-Aristotelian synthesis in psychology as mainstream “normal science.” Its fundamental principle is that psychological phenomena are to be explained in terms of internal psychological mechanisms that bring them about. Roughly, this meant that psychological explanations should be couched in terms of the interaction of (perhaps only postulated) psychological mechanisms. In the case of cognition, these mechanisms are for the most part subpersonal and semi-autonomous, that is, they do not involve the whole person as agent but only some psychological mechanism, and further that these mechanisms have a degree of independence from one another in their operation. Introspective psychological phenomena are the product of the interaction of such inner mechanisms. These (perhaps postulated) psychological mechanisms, each a locus of activity and in that sense quasi-agential, are causally interconnected; typically one causes or triggers the action of another, where the causation in question is analyzed in terms of potency and act. In general, their existence and nature is deduced from the functions they discharge. Typically, these semi-autonomous mental modules – usually called ‘faculties’ – transfer (or ‘transduce’) information from one relatively isolated part or mechanism to another. The process of transference was understood as the ‘transmission of form’, on the grounds that to count as information at all what is transferred must have some structure; when the process of transmission is information-preserving, it was understood as an instance of ‘the same form’ in each faculty. The vehicle by which the form is transferred is itself a mental representation (*species*) which mediates among the several faculties of the mind. To summarize: According to the neo-Aristotelian synthesis, the best explanation of cognitive psychological phenomena is given by functionally-defined subpersonal mechanisms operating in relative independence on representations. At this level of generality, their project closely resembles contemporary cognitive science. Details bear out the similarity at the ‘base level’ of sense-perception (sensitive cognition), the analysis of which is integrated in a broader causal account.

[4] *Body and Soul.* How is the soul related to the body? There were three possibilities: (a) souls and bodies are each substances, somehow linked together, a kind of ‘dualism’; (b) souls just are emergent features of bodies, including the intellective soul; (b) souls have an ontological status that is bound up with, yet perhaps to some extent distinct from, the bodies they are bound up with. As for (a), the medieval tradition is uniform in rejecting such duality, if for no other reason than that two substances cannot combine to make a ‘new’ substance that is *per se* a unity; Augustine rejected this alternative, and later on it was allied with Aristotle’s critique of Plato in the *De anima*. As for (b), there comes to be a tradition within nominalism, especially with Buridan and his followers, of holding that the intellective soul is exactly like the sensitive soul; this comes to be an extremely influential position in the Renaissance (as in *e.g.* Zabarella). As for (c), the mainstream view was that the soul is related to the body as its *form*, and further that it is its *substantial form*, which may have some independent
ontological standing. The discussion was often carried out in debates over the unity or the plurality of substantial form, in which the mainstream view was carved out by Duns Scotus (improving on the position articulated by Henry of Ghent); we have talked about it a bit. The considerations here enable us to get some traction on the question why the mind-body problem isn’t medieval.

[5] The Soul and its Faculties. Aquinas, following Albert the Great, held that the faculties of the soul are both really distinct from one another and really distinct from the soul itself, although they are “rooted” in the soul. He reasons that what the soul is isn’t what it does, and that potencies are distinguished by (the type of) their acts – briefly, that cognitive potencies are directed at the true, while appetitive potencies are directed at the good; this intensional distinction among proper objects is underwritten by an extensional distinction among powers/potencies. Furthermore, understanding and willing are not part of the essence of the human soul, since we would then always be engaged in understanding and willing. In each of these cases the distinction is real: it is not merely how we choose to regard the soul with regard to its faculties, or the faculties with regard to one another. Hence the faculties of the soul are rooted in it as its features (proprietates). Aquinas’s view was widely seen as too extreme: if the powers of the human soul are really distinct from it, then, at least by divine power, it seems that God could create a human soul without the powers of understanding or willing – but what would that be? Yet despite the consensus that Aquinas’s view was too radical, there was no general agreement on what kind of real difference there was among the soul and its faculties. Henry of Ghent proposed that psychological faculties were real relational aspects of the soul distinct only through his intentional distinction; Scotus proposed that they were formally distinct but “unitively contained” as the soul – very roughly, that the intensional distinctions at play need not be underwritten by an extensional distinction. While the broad ‘realist’ tradition was the mainstream, Ockham rejected it entirely: he maintained that there was merely a conceptual distinction between the soul and its faculties, and among its faculties. (He admitted a real distinction between the intellective and sensitive souls, though.) Instead, wielding his razor, Ockham saw no reason to postulate a real difference, especially in light of the fact that it is one and the same soul that thinks and chooses; he accordingly countenances only a conceptual distinction.

[6] Transduction. Given that the sensitive and intellective souls are different domains (and perhaps different ‘things’), how can they intercommunicate? This is the Problem of Transduction. There were several answers. First, the hallmark of thought might be its generality or universality, in which case transduction is accomplished by abstraction, as in Aquinas and Scotus. Second, it might be that the information present in the sensitive domain simply has to be seen “in a new light,” so that transduction is a matter of illumination, as in Bonaventure and Henry of Ghent. Third, the need for transduction might be denied, as Ockham does. Each of these replies has its philosophical advantages and disadvantages; none of them clearly dominates the field.

[7] Representation/Intentionality and its (Dis)contents. There were four ways to explain the representationality of mental representation – that is, the feature(s) in virtue of which a mental representation represents what it represents, or, more generally, a thought is ‘about’ what it is about: (i) the sameness or identity of form, known as conformality; (ii) resemblance or likeness; (iii) causal origin; (iv) signification. These features were often uncritically taken to go together. Roughly speaking, there is a shift from the earlier features to the later features, but the development is complex. Conformality is perhaps the most deeply entrenched notion, since it is the linchpin of the Neo-Aristotelian Synthesis; the failure of simple versions of conformality (as found in thinkers such as Aquinas) led Scotus to develop a ‘composite’ version of conformality – or, as we would describe it today, to develop an account of mental content. Sometimes the claim that thoughts are ‘like’ what they are thoughts of was read literally (as by William Crathorn), but usually explained in terms of picturing, taken more or less strictly. Problems with conformality and likeness saw a shift to externalist theories of covariance and linguistic role to explain how a thought can be about something, as in William of Ockham.
Singular Thought. Aquinas took generality to be the hallmark of thought, and, shortly after his death, was accused by William de la Mare of being unable to deal with singular thought – the possibility of a thought being about an individual (though not in the de re sense). How can the Neo-Aristotelian Synthesis explain singular thought? Some philosophers tried to defend Aquinas by elaborating a theory of “turning to the phantasm” (conuersio ad phantasmata). In an effort to avoid the problem, Scotus introduced (or at least made famous) the distinction between intuitive and abstractive cognition. The former was the cognition of an existing and present object as existent and present; the latter, by contrast, ‘abstracts’ from presence and existence, though it may well be of an individual.

Self-Knowledge and Consciousness. Questions regarding self-knowledge and reflexivity stem from Augustine, and posed particular difficulty to thinkers such as Aquinas. They become the focus of debates in the Franciscan tradition, involving Matthew of Acquasparta, Roger Marston, Peter John Olivi, Duns Scotus, and Vital du Four – debates which eventually came to be cashed out as whether there was an intuitive cognition of one’s soul or only of one’s psychological acts. (This is related to issues about what it is to have knowledge of a substance rather than merely its accidents.) Olivi, who generally rejected the neo-Aristotelian synthesis, generalized the issue to what has been thought to be ‘awareness’ (attentio) in general; by and large, though, consciousness (not quite the same thing) was thought to be a feature of higher-order mental acts, an account hammered out in debates between William of Ockham, Walter Chatton, and Adam Wodeham.

Further Reading

Most of these topics are dealt with in the standard reference works: The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy, the Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy, the Oxford Handbook to Medieval Philosophy, the several Cambridge Companion volumes dedicated to medieval philosophers, and various articles in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. More particular treatments can be found in the following works.

For (§3): The initial formation of the neo-Aristotelian synthesis in cognitive psychology is partly covered in Bieniak [2010]. Historical surveys are to be found in Tachau [1988] and Pasnau [1997]. There are several extended studies of the views of individual philosophers, most notably Henry of Ghent in Goehring [2006], John Duns Scotus in Cross [2014], and William of Ockham in Panaccio [2004], each of which may be consulted as regards the more particular problems the synthesis faced. The details of the neo-Aristotelian synthesis in cognitive psychology can be found in almost any of the general reference works listed above. Some dissenters from the mainstream are discussed in Pasnau [1997] and Brower-Tolland [2013] (Olivi) and in Adriaenssen [2014] (Olivi and Auriol).


For (§4–5): Mental architecture and its metaphysical underpinnings is the main focus of King [2008] and Perler [2013].

For (§6): The problem of transduction, especially the contrast between abstractive and illuminationist account of cognition, is dealt with in King [1994]. Spruit [1994] surveys the history of the debates over the need for an intellective representation, a key feature in transduction. Klima [2011] takes up abstraction, while Pini [2015] looks at occurrent thought in Aquinas and Scotus. Henry of Ghentâ‘s views about how causality is related to cognition is taken up in Pickavé [2015].

For (§7): King [2007] gives an overview of how to think about representation and intentionality in the
Middle Ages; Klima [2004] and 2015 give top-down accounts of medieval theories of representation, while Tweedale [2007] offers a historical survey. Aquinas is dealt with in Panaccio [2001] and in Brower & Brower-Tolland [2008]; his account is contrasted with that of Durand of St.-Pourçain in Hartman [2013], and with Ockham and Buridan in Klima [2011a]. King [2004] and Pini [2008] analyze Scotus’s views of cognition and mental content. Ockham’s alternative account, and in particular the question of his externalism, is treated in Brower-Tolland [2007a and 2007b as well as in Panaccio [2015]; King [2003] emphasizes instead Ockham’s shift to competencies.

For (§8): Singular thought is the main focus of Normore [2007] and King [2015].


