

3 Medieval Universes in Disorder

Primeval Chaos and Its Authoritative Coordinates

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Just like any of us, medieval scholars, too, could observe patterns of continuity and regularity in the standard behaviour of natural entities. A stone will naturally fall if no violent force is impressed to it and a fire will burn some timber if no obstacle occurs. With more complex entities, too, patterns of regularity can and were considered as bearing witness to an order within nature which had been impressed by a benevolent creator or a divine craftsman. The universe was (and in part still is) considered as a *machina mundi* whose behaviour could be dissected, understood, and explained in relation to its intrinsic order.

A question, however, seems to have intrigued medieval philosophers and theologians for centuries: has the universe always been like it is now? The problem was whether the immutable natural order we appreciate now corresponded to the original stage of the incipient universe. There were some hints indicating that, at the beginning of everything, the universe was different from what we see and touch now. One of the wiser philosophers of the past, Plato, claimed that the world was in a state of chaos before being ordered by a divine Demiurge. Such a position was also maintained by important classic works that were used for learned education, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. And one of the most influential theologians, Augustine, used primeval chaos as a hermeneutical tool to expound the Biblical narrative. Hence, there were good authoritative bases to affirm that the universe was indeed different from how it is nowadays at the beginning of everything – indeed, such a hypothesis was thoroughly discussed and assessed, especially in the 12th century. During that same century, however, many new sources were translated into Latin from Greek and Arabic. These new texts offered a very different consideration of the hypothesis of primeval chaos. Most noticeably, Aristotle rejected the many instantiations of a “disordered universe” as either being incipient universe or basic state of nature. The Aristotelisation of European philosophy that followed, reshaped thoroughly the debate on natural philosophy, and with it, the consideration of primeval chaos as a tenable explanation of cosmogenesis.

In the following pages, I want to briefly examine the change of attitude of 13th-century philosophers concerning primeval chaos. It should be noted

that medieval philosophy is the result of original theoretical speculations, grounded on a set of shared references, inherited by the tradition. The tradition itself is fluid (the 12th-century translations of Aristotle and Islamicate authors are the best examples of such fluidity) and the shared framework of meaningful references for a specific debate is fluid as well. A set of authoritative sources may be valid in one context but not on others, and the main authoritative references of the debate differ from one period to another. I call this set of main philosophical sources the *authoritative coordinates* of a debate. As we shall see, the 13th-century discussion on primeval chaos is grounded on a shift in the authoritative coordinates of the debate whose references, nonetheless, do not imply that the “old sources” were not studied or used anymore.

The sources providing the authoritative coordinates of a debate carry out the function of meaningful shared references for the discussion. This happens in reason of their specific theoretical input to the debated problem. A good example of such function is the use of Averroes and Avicenna in the later medieval debate on elemental mixture.¹ Authoritative coordinates are usually explicit, yet not necessarily. Like a sea wave is visible at its crest, yet grounded on the momentum built at its trough, the authoritative framework of medieval philosophical texts is constituted, too, by a set of sources which are made visible in reason of epistemic requirements (usually justificatory or refutational functions) and a wider set of sources that are not mentioned by the author, yet provide the theoretical momentum to the theory.²

In the 12th-century debate of primeval chaos, explicit authoritative coordinates were Ovid and Hugh of St. Victor. They were explicitly mentioned (either positively or negatively) and play the role of *crest sources* in many works of the period. In turn, other authoritative coordinates are implicit, yet shaped the discussion even more than Ovid and Hugh of St. Victor. These *trough sources*, like Calcidius, provided the main tenets of the discussion although they are seldom mentioned as authorities. As I will show in the next pages, the authoritative coordinates of the debate on primeval chaos change drastically with the passage to the 13th century. The “new” coordinates are provided by Aristotle and the sources made available by the translations, which are the crest sources of that debate. Hence, instead of Ovid, Plato, and Calcidius, the authorities to be quoted and almost constantly refuted are Hesiod, Anaxagoras, and Empedocles – all authors whose works were unavailable to the medieval authors refuting their positions.

In the first section of this paper, I discuss the philosophical stances providing the traditional authoritative coordinates of the debate on primeval chaos in the 12th century. As I have already discussed the 12th-century debate elsewhere, I will focus on how the “old” sources are substituted by “new” ones by some relevant authors from the 13th century commenting on Aristotle’s works.³ Accordingly, the second section examines Roger Bacon’s commentaries on Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. The third section, in turn, expands on Thomas Aquinas’s and Albert the Great’s attitude towards