



# From Meditation to Contemplation: Broadening the Borders of Philosophy in the Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries

*Christina Van Dyke*

In this chapter, I argue that the development of imaginative meditation as both a literary genre and a devotional practice played a formative role in women's being accepted as "knowers" in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries—and, thus, in women's impacting the Western philosophical tradition. European Christian communities throughout this period used meditations to encourage a deeper, more personal love for Christ via imaginative engagement, often asking readers to imagine themselves present at various moments in Christ's life. In its emphasis on sensation and feeling, meditation was seen as an activity particularly suited for women and their closer ties with the body. At the same time, the portrayal of contemplation as the highest form of both knowledge and meditation means that women were understood as gaining access to the philosophical realm as they progressed in meditation. As love becomes increasingly portrayed

---

C. Van Dyke (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Barnard College at Columbia University,  
New York, NY, USA

e-mail: [cvandyke@barnard.edu](mailto:cvandyke@barnard.edu)

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature  
Switzerland AG 2023

A. L. Griffioen, M. Backmann (eds.), *Pluralizing Philosophy's Past*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13405-0\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13405-0_15)

as the central means to achieving volitional and intellectual union with God—the end-goal of contemplation—the widespread popularity of imaginative meditations opened up space for women’s claims to the highest forms of knowledge to be accepted *because of* (rather than despite) their association with the body.

Our experience of the world around us is crucial to our moral and spiritual lives. In acknowledging this, the medieval meditative tradition offers an important complement to scholastic philosophy’s focus on abstract argumentation. It also demonstrates how an emphasis on embodied forms of knowing can include people from epistemically/educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, it reminds us that philosophy can—and should—be about self-discovery and self-formation just as much as it is about argumentation and critical reasoning.

### 15.1 SENSATION AND IMAGINATION

Medieval meditation developed as a means to engage and train bodily faculties—in particular, sensation and imagination—toward spiritual goods. As such, it provides a particularly good example of how medieval philosophy influenced moral and spiritual practices: meditation becomes one of the most widely practiced spiritual exercises in the later Middle Ages in large part because it uses natural philosophical theories about sense perception, sense appetite, and imagination to help human beings reach their ultimate end (as opposed to pushing people to avoid embodied engagement with the world, which most people were unable and/or unwilling to do). In order to understand both the significance of the meditative genre, then, and its impact on women’s epistemic possibilities, we must begin with an overview of how this tradition understood sensation and imagination.

A full treatment of this topic would, of course, be tremendously complex, with any number of details hotly debated. That said, it’s fair to say that most people in the “Latin West” in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries viewed human beings as composites of body and soul—that is, neither merely souls with bodies attached (à la Plato) nor merely living bodies (à la the Epicureans or the Stoics). The body was seen as providing the soul with information about the world around it, and the soul was seen as using that information both to make decisions about responding to that

world and to transcend the particularity of that world by comprehending unchanging universal truths.<sup>1</sup>

The relation between body and soul was complicated by the distorting effects of sin, which tugs the will away from the true good and clouds the intellect, making both the body's and the soul's tasks substantially more difficult. In fact, God's help was seen as necessary for remediating sin's effects. The ultimate source of all truth, goodness, and being, God was understood to have voluntarily become part of the material world (via the incarnation of Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity) in order to overcome the effects of sin and reconcile creation with the Creator. Medieval views on the relation between the material world and divine truths were correspondingly complex, depicting an intricate latticework of connections between body, soul, world, and God in which sensation and imagination as well as intellect and will played key roles.<sup>2</sup>

In both the scholastic and the contemplative traditions, "sensation" is a term that broadly denotes the work of our sensory capacities, capacities which include the "sense appetite"—an appetite or desire whose general purpose is to be drawn on a sensory level toward what's good for us. The *Cloud of Unknowing* describes sensation as "the power that affects and controls our body's perceptions" (Anonymous 2009, 147). Its job is to pull us toward physical objects that are good for us (e.g., a ripe pear) and to push away from things that are bad for us (e.g., moldy bread), while allowing us to "know and experience all of physical creation, both pleasant and unpleasant" (147). Sense appetite is also linked with the will in this tradition, for the will is also often commonly portrayed as an appetite—namely, a rational appetite for the good.<sup>3</sup>

The proper use of sensation is thus crucial for the development of virtue. As Catherine of Siena notes, "Sensation is a servant, and it has been appointed to serve the soul, so that your body may be your instrument for proving and exercising virtue" (Catherine of Siena 1980, 105). The will needs to respond to the impetus provided to it by sense appetite predictably and appropriately in order to be considered virtuous.<sup>4</sup> Sensation's

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview of theories of human nature in this period, see Dales (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these issues and positions, see Hasse (2009). For a classic scholastic discussion of *sensualitas* as a power of the human soul, see Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* Ia 81.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Aquinas's *Treatise on Happiness*, Q 1.2.co.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of the relation between virtue and the will—and how it changes during the period on which I'm focusing, see Kent (1995).

relation to the will is mirrored by imagination's relation to the intellect. The *Cloud of Unknowing* describes imagination as "the power that helps us form mental images of anything present or absent" (Anonymous 2009, 145). Its primary role is to assist reason by calling up impressions from our memory. Reason and imagination work together on these impressions, allowing us to isolate various features of past sensory experiences, to combine them in new and interesting ways, and to draw important connections between them.

Both sense appetite and imagination thus play a crucial role in our moral and spiritual formation. We might see a cozy pair of pajama pants online, for instance, and resist their initial tug on our sense appetite's desire for comfort, and then later indulge in vividly imagining just how wonderful they might feel on cold winter mornings. If we consistently yield to the desire to click "buy" on the website in response, our will's ability to resist such promptings will become weaker and weaker, and we'll end up with more pajama pants (and less money) than we need. Fortunately, we can also use imagination and sense appetite to encourage the formation of virtue. In this example, our sensory appetite's pull toward the pajamas could spark reflection on how many pairs we already own, and then we could use imagination to picture how happy those pajama pants might make someone else, leading us to donate them to charity or buy them for a friend for Christmas.

A central component in medieval meditations is training sensation and imagination to help rather than distract our intellects and will in just these sorts of way. And, because Christ both represents the ideal human life and is also God, most meditations focus on engaging the sense and the imagination to love Christ more deeply. In fact, Bonaventure reports Christ explaining the Incarnation to him as a way of sparking love for God: "The reason I became visible was in order that you might see me and give me of your love, for I was not loved in my Godhead because I was unseen and invisible" (Bonaventure 2016, 70).

## 15.2 THE MEDITATIVE TRADITION

Originally meditation was an exercise advocated as appropriate for cloistered monks, but by the end of the thirteenth century it had become a popular genre of literature and a spiritual discipline available to all comers. Following on the twelfth-century *Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations* (written by Guigo II for the Carthusian Order), meditation was often

portrayed and practiced as the second of four linked exercises: (1) close reading<sup>5</sup> of passages from Scripture (*lectio divina*), (2) meditation (*meditatio*), (3) prayer (*oratio*), and (4) contemplation (*contemplatio*).<sup>6</sup> *Lectio divina* fills the senses with the sacred words of Scripture; meditation brings those words to life via imagination's working and kindles the fire of love for God. Prayer then connects this love directly to God and works to make the person more receptive to contemplation—which (as we'll see in Sect. 15.4) is a paradoxically receptive activity in which the person receives direct experience of God's own essence.

To kindle greater devotion to God via love for Christ, books of meditations typically describe events in Christ's life in vivid detail, encouraging their reader/hearer to engage imaginatively in those scenes. As the author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, for instance, counsels that, "If you wish to profit from all this, Sister, you must place yourself in the presence of whatever is related as having been said or done by the Lord Jesus, as if you were hearing it with your own ears and seeing it with your own eyes, giving it your total mental response: with care, delight, and sorrow, and with all extraneous cares and concerns set aside for the time being" (John of Caulibus [*sic*]<sup>7</sup> 2000, 4). Thus, in her late thirteenth-century *Page of Meditations*, the Carthusian nun Marguerite of Oingt poignantly compares Christ's earthly suffering to labor and childbirth. Addressing Christ, she writes:

Are you not my mother and more than mother? The mother who bore me labored at my birth for one day or one night, but you, my sweet and lovely Lord, were in pain for me not just one day, but you were in labor for more than thirty years. Oh, sweet and lovely Lord, how bitterly were you in labor for me all through your life! But when the time approached when you had to give birth, the labor was such that your holy sweat was like drops of blood

<sup>5</sup>This reading could—and often did—happen communally as well as individually, with one person reading a passage out loud to an attentive group.

<sup>6</sup>For chapter-length discussions of each of these practices, see Hollywood and Beckman (2012), especially E. Ann Matter's "*Lectio Divina*" (147–56), Thomas Bestul's "*Meditatio/Meditation*" (157–66), Rachel Fulton Brown's "*Oratio/Prayer*" (167–77), Charlotte Radler's "*Actio et Contemplatio/Action and Contemplation*" (211–24), as well as Bernard McGinn's "*Unio Mystica/Mystical Union*" (200–10).

<sup>7</sup>*Editors' note:* Here and below, this citation may be a bit misleading. When this translation of the *Meditations* appeared, John of Caulibus was generally thought to have authored this text, and he is still listed as the author in this translation. However, it now seems nearly certain that he was not the author. We have thus inserted [*sic*] behind his name to indicate this.

which poured out of your body onto the ground. [...] When the hour of birth came, you were placed on the hard bed of the cross where you could not move or turn around or stretch your limbs as someone who suffers much pain should be able to do. [...] And surely it was no wonder that your veins were broken when you gave birth to the world all in one day. (Marguerite of Oingt 1990, 31)<sup>8</sup>

A mother's pain in childbirth would have been intimately familiar to most of Marguerite's readers (who ranged from fellow Carthusians—both monks and nuns—to religious and layfolk throughout France), given that neither hospitals nor privacy were widely available in medieval Europe.<sup>9</sup> The description of Christ as forced to labor without even being allowed to move around to ease his suffering makes mentally placing oneself at the site of his pain all the more intense, and the idea that Jesus is suffering to give birth to *us* creates a sense of personal connection to the event.

Marguerite's *Meditation* is short and focused entirely on Christ's Passion, but longer and more detailed books of meditations cover a whole range of episodes in the life of both Christ and his mother Mary. Of these, by far the most widely read and influential example is the late thirteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ*.<sup>10</sup> Building on the knowledge of Scripture the reader would have absorbed via *lectio divina*, the *Meditations* instructs its readers to imagine what it would have been like to experience various moments in the life of Mary and Christ with them, whether or not those moments are explicitly described in Scripture. In the chapter on the Holy Family's return from their flight to Egypt, for instance, the reader is asked to imagine how difficult the trip must have been for Jesus who, according to tradition, would have been about three years old: "When he came to Egypt, he was such a tiny thing that he could be carried. Now, he is just big enough that he cannot be carried very easily and just small enough that he cannot walk very far" (John of Caulibus [*sic*] 2000, 50). We are asked to imagine that some kind soul has given Jesus a small

<sup>8</sup>Although striking in contemporary contexts, the depiction of Jesus as mother is relatively common in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. For an influential study of the history of this depiction, see Walker Bynum (1984).

<sup>9</sup>For more on Marguerite's use of imagery and readership, see Fibra (2017).

<sup>10</sup>Translated into a number of vernaculars, including Nicholas Love's influential English *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, the *Meditations* remained wildly popular well into the sixteenth century; its impact on late medieval culture would be hard to overstate. For the definitive Latin edition, see *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (1997).

donkey to ride, and that we are walking alongside him. “When he wants to dismount,” the text advises, “Take him joyfully in your arms, and hold him a bit” (51).

Going beyond the recorded events of Scripture was seen as another way of engaging the senses and imagination to develop a more personal, deeper love for God. As Grace Jantzen writes, “Imaginative meditation was to be encouraged, not cramped by the literal or historical sense, because it is by imaginative entry into the mystical sense of scripture that the love and grace of God can be encountered” (Jantzen 1995, 82). Such engagement was also viewed as an important component of developing virtue in the will and the intellect: our inclination to care for others and our ability to do so wisely increases as our love for God grows. As the prologue to the *Meditations* states, the person who meditates frequently “is illuminated by divine virtue in such a way that she both clothes herself with virtue and distinguishes what is false from what is true: so much so that there have been many unlettered and simple persons who have come to know about the great and puzzling truths of God in this way” (John of Caulibus [*sic*] 2000, 3).

This progression from imaginative meditation to knowledge of divine truths is also part of the move from the exercise of meditation to that of contemplation. As Michelle Karnes notes, “The most important cognitive task assigned to medieval imagination was the discovery of truth” (Karnes 2011, 4). The message of the prologue of the *Meditations* is that anyone who practices this discipline sincerely and regularly—whether ordained clergy or layperson, male or female—can gain access to the higher truths of God. Indeed, the use of the female pronoun in the quote above is not a contemporary feminist rendering: the *Meditations* is addressed to a woman associated with the Franciscan order, and the text uses female pronouns throughout to refer to human beings. As we’ll see in Sect. 15.3, the physiological features that were claimed to limit women’s ability to cog-nize were also viewed as increasing their ability to love, giving them entry into higher realms of contemplation via this love.

### 15.3 CLEAR EYES, FULL HEARTS: WOMEN'S BODIES AND RECEPTION OF TRUTH

The portrayal of women in medical texts and popular culture as physically and emotionally more receptive and sensitive (and therefore more dependent) than men was used to justify all sorts of structural injustices throughout the Middle Ages, including the exclusion of women from the higher echelons of the church and the university system.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, women were seen as better at forming sensory and imaginative impressions and better at loving than their male counterparts.<sup>12</sup> The emergence of meditation as a spiritual discipline that put sensory and imaginative powers to work firing the will's love for Christ thus made it a natural fit for women's devotional lives. And as love became increasingly portrayed as the central means toward knowledge of and union with God, women were increasingly seen as contemplative as well as meditative authorities.

Although women, like men, were understood to be rational animals and made in God's image, women's bodies were not taken to produce the "active seed" from which other humans are generated, and so women were commonly viewed as incomplete and/or "misbegotten" instantiations of human nature.<sup>13</sup> One supposed result of this incompleteness was that female bodies were composed of colder and more watery matter than male bodies (which were warmer and more earthy). This physical constitution purportedly made women, with their softer and more impressionable bodies, more sensitive to sensory stimuli and passions (Allen 2006). In fact, it was thought to make them overly sensitive to and easily overwhelmed by such stimuli, making them easily distracted from rational thought and rendering them generally less able to exercise self-control or maximize their cognitive capacities.

It's worth noting that not all men were seen as able to maximize their rational capacities either: on the opposite side of the continuum from women were the "natural laborers," who were said to be unsuited for

<sup>11</sup> See Allen (2006) for a detailed history of these arguments—and medieval responses to them.

<sup>12</sup> For more on women's superior claim to loving, see "*La mystique courtoise: Thirteenth Century Beguines and the Art of Love*" in Newman (1995), 137–67, as well as "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" in Newman (2003), 137–89.

<sup>13</sup> See Aquinas's *Summa*, Ia 92 for a very standard account of the nature of women and women's bodies. Galenic biology saw women as also producing seed necessary for generation, but of a lesser sort.



intellective labor or ruling because their bodies were too tough to take in the full range of sense impressions or engage well in imaginative exercises. Both groups were portrayed as naturally subordinated to the men whose physiology was “just right”: those men with bodies receptive enough to give them nuanced sensory information about which to cognize, but whose bodies were not so receptive to that sensory information that they would easily be distracted or overwhelmed by it.<sup>14</sup> This continuum—which constructed the “ideal” human being as a male who straddled the mean between “too sensitive” and “too insensitive”—was used to assign the most important intellectual, political, and spiritual responsibilities to those men and to deny those responsibilities to everyone else.

Yet this same continuum grounded the common belief that women loved more and better than their male counterparts. Women’s more watery nature meant that sense perception affected them more deeply and that their imaginations were correspondingly more vivid. Passions—including love—were closely linked with sensory and bodily changes and, as their name implies, were also seen as receptive reactions: one surrenders to love, for instance, or is carried off by sorrow. Women’s physiology was seen as ideally suited to passionate engagement with the world around them, as opposed to abstract theorizing about it—a “fact” that was used to extol women’s capacity for love and devotion at the same time it was used to exclude women from the “dispassionate” rational discourse of politics, theology, and scholastic philosophy.

The genre of imaginative meditation offered a spiritual discipline in which women’s more receptive, passionate natures constituted a strength rather than a weakness. The fact that Christ’s central reconciling acts involved self-humbling, suffering, crying, and bleeding meant that the meditator needed to cultivate empathy and compassion for precisely those sorts of acts (note the *pathe*/passion in both those words). The more vividly the meditator could imagine Christ’s suffering on the cross, for instance, the more moved by passion they would be—and the more love they would feel for the God who made such a sacrifice for them. This increased love, which the *Meditations* describes as “affection inflamed enough for you to warm your whole self in it” (John of Caulibus [*sic*] 2000, 330), was the central goal of meditation. It was the result of

<sup>14</sup>For instance, in the *Summa*, Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that those with soft flesh are “quick-witted”: “Therefore it is said in *De Anima* ii that ‘we can see that men of soft flesh are of quick intelligence’” (Ia 78.4.co.).

carefully training the senses and the imagination so that they supported rather than distracted the will toward its proper object: love for God. And it was an activity seen as naturally suited for women.

If meditation were seen as a self-contained discipline, the story might end there—with a reductive account of how women’s perceived weakness gave them an edge in a popular medieval spiritual exercise but didn’t ultimately impact or challenge received views of women as knowers. As we saw in Sect. 15.2, however, meditation was a spiritual exercise that constituted an important preparation for contemplation. Love was seen as intrinsically linked with an agent’s ability to know truth in its highest forms: without a burning love for God, a human being’s attempt to know or unite with God was doomed to failure. The fourteenth-century Dominican tertiary Catherine of Siena captures the feedback loop of love and knowledge by describing them as working together to form an upward spiral that culminates in contemplation of God’s essence: “For love follows upon understanding. The more they know, the more they love, and the more they love, the more they know. Thus, each nourishes the other. By this light they reach the eternal vision of me (God) [...] This is that superb state in which the soul even while still mortal shares the enjoyment of the immortals” (Catherine of Siena 1980, 157–8). First, we learn about God from the world around us and from Scripture. That initial understanding ignites a love for God via meditative reflection; this love then drives us to know God better, and the more we know about God, the more we love God. On this widely accepted model, the fulfillment of one power (e.g., the will, via love for God) naturally leads to the fulfillment of another (e.g., the intellect, via knowledge of God). As Julian of Norwich writes, the human soul does best when it does “what it was made to do: see God, contemplate God, and love God” (Julian of Norwich 2013, 109). In this tradition, then, a claim to great love is often simultaneously a claim to great knowledge.

Although I lack space here to develop this point, I believe that it is hardly coincidental that the genre of meditations develops and gains enormous popularity in an age when—contrary to common contemporary belief—many women were literate.<sup>15</sup> Far from being forbidden to read or write, women in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries were often depicted in religious art both holding and reading books. In fact, given that women were often portrayed wielding books next to men doing

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see Mulder-Bakker (2004).

precisely the same thing, the depiction of women in this way forms an undeniable testament to their received status as subjects and transmitters of knowledge. Moreover, in addition to being “avid collectors, readers, and critics of the vast amount of devotional literature produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (Bornstein 1996, 4), women also authored, recorded, and transmitted popular and influential texts in this period.

Some women were educated because they came from noble families and needed to be prepared to manage households that were essentially small towns. Others were educated either in convents or in beguinages by their fellow religious laywomen. Even women who were not themselves literate sometimes participated in creating and transmitting texts via dictation.<sup>16</sup> Whatever their background, however, the common emphasis on sensation, imagination, and love in the meditative tradition allowed women who so desired to claim the status of contemplative. The final piece that allowed them to be accepted as genuine contemplatives—and, thus, to form a crucial part of the contemplative philosophical tradition in the later Middle Ages—is that contemplation itself was understood to be as receptive as it was active.

#### 15.4 CONTEMPLATION AS A PARADOXICALLY RECEPTIVE ACTIVITY

To this point, I have been speaking of meditation as though it were a carefully circumscribed exercise, but its status in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries was actually much more complex. It was not just one part of the *lectio divina*—meditation—prayer—contemplation set of spiritual disciplines; rather, meditation was itself frequently portrayed as the first of three stages of contemplation. The person who hasn’t engaged repeatedly in the first three exercises—close reading of Scripture, extensive meditation on Christ, and connective prayer—will likely lack the love that prepares them for direct contact with God. We can’t force God to illuminate us or love us, however; we can only make ourselves ready for the gift of grace if and when it comes. Because human beings were not able to directly make contemplation happen, the highest forms of knowledge were thus seen as an activity of which we were not completely in control and which required remaining open and receptive. Because women were

<sup>16</sup> See Lewis (1996), Winston-Allen (2004), Minnis and Voaden (2010), and Ward (2016).

seen as naturally more receptive than active, they could leverage meditations' training of sensation, imagination, and will to situate themselves as ideally receptive for higher forms of contemplation. As the prologue of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, which is itself addressed to a woman, notes: "You see then, to what an exalted height meditation on the life of Christ leads. Like a sturdy platform, it lifts one to greater heights of contemplation" (John of Caulibus [*sic*] 2000, 3).

The *Meditations* characterizes the stages of contemplation as involving first an "imperfect" form of contemplation focused on the humanity of Christ, and then two other stages of contemplation (focused respectively on heaven and finally on union with God's essence). The first stage is what it (and I, following the tradition) have been calling "meditation." The others remain inaccessible to us without extensive meditation of this kind: "Do not ever believe that you can elevate yourself mentally to the sublimities of God unless you devote yourself long and diligently to this teaching [meditation on the life of Christ]" (John of Caulibus [*sic*] 2000, 172).

Meditation is important for making intermediate spiritual progress, according to the *Cloud of Unknowing*: "Without countless sweet meditations on these very subjects—our agony, our shame, Christ's Passion, God's kindness, God's unfailing goodness, and God's worth—the contemplative person won't advance" (Anonymous 2009, 330–1). Sufficient meditation and prayer are indispensable for reaching the higher stages of contemplation that lift us above everything sensible, imaginable, and intelligible.

The final stage of contemplation in particular transcends anything we are capable of attaining on our own; it requires God's gift of love. As Julian of Norwich describes the culmination of this process:

Then I perceived that his continual working in every kind of thing is so beautifully done—so wise and powerful—that it surpasses our greatest imagination. God's goodness transcends all thought, all comprehension. At that point, all we can do is contemplate him and rejoice. We allow ourselves to be filled with the overwhelming desire for one-ing with our Beloved, to listen deeply for his call. We delight in his goodness and revel in his love. (Julian of Norwich 2013, 107–8)

As love becomes seen as increasingly central not just in meditation but also in contemplation, the women quoted throughout this chapter become accepted as contemplatives—not just able to speak with confidence about

their knowledge of God, but able to be heard and believed, by other women, by scholastic philosophers, and by the highest echelons of the Catholic Church.

### 15.5 MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CLASSROOM

Our experience of both ourselves and the world around us is crucial to our moral and spiritual lives—a fact that’s been made extremely (even at times painfully) clear to most of us during the pandemic. The medieval meditative tradition fully acknowledges the importance of embodied existence; in so doing, it constitutes an important complement to scholastic philosophy’s focus on abstract argumentation. Scholastic arguments have received the lion’s share of attention in medieval philosophy over the past two centuries. In their own time, however, such arguments were of interest primarily for the role they played in *the very same discussions* that form the backbone of medieval contemplative literature: discussions about the nature of God, the ultimate goal of human life, and how human beings should live in a broken world.<sup>17</sup> If we reunite scholasticism with its contemplative counterpart, in the classroom and beyond, we gain a conception of medieval philosophy much truer to its original practice and its emphasis on self-formation and moral/spiritual development as the best way of reaching wisdom.

Such a reunion also has the happy effect of naturally including a wide range of perspectives. While a thirteenth-century disputed question—on, say, the nature of imagination and its relation to knowledge—written by a master of theology at the University of Paris might include a variety of perspectives from other university masters, perhaps even in different religious orders, arguing for and against a particular conclusion, the author will invariably be male and almost invariably a member of a religious order, often from the higher echelons of society. In contrast, a contemplative text addressing the same issue might be authored by a layperson or clergy, a commoner or nobleperson, and (most significant for the purposes of this chapter) is almost as likely to have been written by a woman as by a man. Although not represented in the scholastic tradition, women formed a

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, many of the figures held up today as paradigms of medieval philosophy (e.g., Anselm, Aquinas, Bonaventure) lived and wrote in both worlds.

prominent part of virtually all strains of the Western Christian contemplative tradition in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries.<sup>18</sup> What this means for teaching philosophy courses is that adding women-authored texts to one's syllabus is as simple as choosing any of the topics one would usually cover in a class that includes medieval philosophy and matching a text in the scholastic tradition with one in the contemplative tradition. For instance, if one were discussing the comparative roles of reason and will, Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* would pair nicely with Duns Scotus's views on the primacy of love over intellect; an overview of medieval conceptions of self-knowledge could include passages from Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* and/or Hadewijch as well as scholastic texts.<sup>19</sup> There is virtually no topic of interest in medieval philosophy that the contemplatives did not also address—often in different genres and from a variety of different perspectives.

As we saw above in Sects. 15.1 and 15.2, moreover, the emphasis contemplative texts place on practical moral and spiritual formation also leads them to focus on embodied experience (including sensation and imagination) as well as the life of mind. This emphasis on embodied forms of knowing presents ways of engaging people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.<sup>20</sup> Every lived experience is valuable in the context of contemplative philosophy, for giving (and receiving) good practical advice requires more than theoretical understanding of abstract truths: it requires negotiating constantly changing surroundings in a variety of settings. Students who don't come from educationally privileged backgrounds are not just often on equal footing when it comes to understanding practical philosophy—they are sometimes at an advantage. When I got to grad school, for instance, I found that the experience I had acquired working full-time at a factory to pay for my college tuition stood me in good stead when studying Marx's theory of alienated labor: I recognized the phenomena he was talking about in a visceral way after spending multiple shifts dropping blue

<sup>18</sup>For extensive documentation of their roles in the development and growth of various religious movements, see McGinn (1998, 2005, 2016).

<sup>19</sup>For discussions of how contemplative philosophy addresses self-knowledge, the role of reason and will in human life, and the importance of love, persons, and immortality in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, see Van Dyke (2022).

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Borland (2013).

plastic scoops into boxes of laundry detergent as they rolled by on a conveyor belt. (When asked whether there wasn't an automated machine that could do this, a line worker replied, "There is, actually—it's over there in the corner. You're cheaper to run.") Contemplative philosophy requires its practitioners to constantly negotiate the line between theory and practice, understanding and implementation. Medieval Christian contemplative philosophy in particular does this with the assumption that love is at the heart of everything, and that God became human to better relate to us and our struggles. The idea of meeting people where they are is central to this tradition; teaching texts that adopt this attitude can be an important step in including the marginalized and overcoming some of the invisible barriers that keep students out of the discipline.

Finally, adding the medieval contemplatives to our classes reminds us that philosophy can (and, in my opinion, should) be about self-discovery and self-formation just as much as it is about argumentation and critical reasoning. The phrase "philosophy as a way of life" is already becoming a cliché, but the reason for its popularity is that it hits at the heart of what philosophy can *do* as well as what it *is*. In the ideal world, philosophy functions in a multiplicity of ways, all of which help us both better understand the world around us and live better in that world. We live in a world today that gives undue focus to the combative and critical side of philosophy. It is time to regain the philosophy that builds up as well as tears down, that generates as well as deconstructs.

### RECOMMENDED READING

- Hollywood, Amy, and P. Beckman, eds. 2012. *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karnes, Michelle. 2011. *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Meditations on the Life of Christ*. 2000. Translated by F.X. Taney, Anne Miller, and C Mary Stallings-Taney. Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press.
- Van Dyke, Christina. 2022. *A Hidden Wisdom: Medieval Contemplatives on Self-Knowledge, Reason, Love, Persons, and Immortality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## REFERENCES

## PRIMARY TEXTS

- Anonymous. 2009. *The Cloud of Unknowing: With the Book of Privy Counselling*. Translated by Carmen Acevedo Butcher. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications.
- Bonaventure. 2016. *The Mystical Vine: A Treatise on the Passion of Our Lord by Saint Bonaventure*. Translated by a Friar of S.S.F. Riverside, IL: Akenside Press.
- Catherine of Siena. 1980. *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*. Translated by Suzanne Noffke. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- d'Oingt, Marguerite. 1990. *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt, Medieval Prioress and Mystic (d. 1310)*. Translated by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- John of Caulibus [sic]. 2000. *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Translated by F.X. Taney, Anne Miller, and C Mary Stallings-Taney. Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press.
- Julian of Norwich. 2013. *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*. Translated by Mirabai Starr. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company.
- Meditationes Vitae Christi*. 1997. Edited by Mary Stallings-Taney. *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 153. Turnhout: Brepols.

## SECONDARY TEXTS

- Allen, Prudence. 2006. *The Concept of Woman*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Borland, Jennifer. 2013. Unruly Reading: The Consuming Role of Touch in the Experience of a Medieval Manuscript. In *Scraped, Stroked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox, 97–114. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Bornstein, David. 1996. Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography. In *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, edited by Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi and translated by Margery Schneider, 1–27. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dales, Richard. 1995. *The Problem of the Rational Soul in the Thirteenth Century*. Leiden: Brill.
- Fibra, Sergi Sancho. 2017. Colors and Books in Marguerite d'Oingt's 'Speculum'. Images for Meditation and Vision. In *Commitments to Medieval Mysticism Within Contemporary Contexts*, ed. Patrick Cooper and Satoshi Kikuchi, 255–271. Leuven: Peeters.
- Hasse, Dag. 2009. The Soul's Faculties. In *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnau and Christina Van Dyke, 305–319. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Hollywood, Amy, and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds. 2012. *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jantzen, Grace. 1995. *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karnes, Michelle. 2011. *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kent, Bonnie. 1995. *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Lewis, Gertrud Jaron. 1996. *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
- McGinn, Bernard. 1998. *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200–1350*, Vol. III of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.
- . 2005. *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500)*, Vol. 4 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.
- . 2016. *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism: 1350–1550*, Vol. 5 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.
- Minnis, Alastair, and Rosalynn Voaden, eds. 2010. *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100–c.1500*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.
- Mulder-Bakker, Anneke, ed. 2004. *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200–1550*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.
- Newman, Barbara. 1995. *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 2003. *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Van Dyke, Christina. 2022. *A Hidden Wisdom: Medieval Contemplatives on Self-Knowledge, Reason, Love, Persons, and Immortality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walker Bynum, Caroline. 1984. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ward, Jennifer. 2016. *Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Winston-Allen, Anne. 2004. *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.