

Medieval Modalities

Is There Still a Story to Tell?

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Abstract: This essay is a critique of Simo Knuuttila's history of medieval modal conceptions, according to which a «statistical» understanding of possibility and necessity was replaced by an idea of synchronic alternative states of affairs, the ancestor of our contemporary model of possible worlds. This idea, unknown in antiquity, owes its origin, Knuuttila argued, to belief in a God who acts by choice. I argue that there was no such change. In considering the problem of divine prescience and contingency, Boethius is not, as Knuuttila maintained, misled by a statistical view of modality. Peter Damian's treatment of God's power of the past, and Anselm's discussion of necessity are best seen as extensions of Boethius's distinction between simple and conditional necessity, not as steps on the way to the development of synchronic modalities. Only by taking passages out of context and misreading them can Gilbert of Poitiers be made into a forefather of possible worlds semantics. Scotus does, indeed, use – but it is not the first to do so – the idea of simultaneous opposite real powers of the will, but he does not develop this thinking into a theory of alternative possible worlds.

Keywords: Possibility, Necessity, Possible Worlds, Aristotle, Duns Scotus.