Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

Albert the Great

Born Lauingen, (Bavaria, Germany), circa 1200

Died Cologne, (Germany), 1280

Albertus Magnus is traditionally credited with introducing Aristotle's philosophy into the Christian West. By doing so, he initiated a period of concern with natural-philosophical questions that had been absent from the Neoplatonist thought dominating Christianity up to that time (and which still played a crucial role in Albert's own thought).

Albertus entered the Dominican order in 1223, studying at Padua, Bologna, and Paris. He taught at the University of Paris from 1245 to 1248, when he moved to Cologne, where he spent the remainder of his life. Albertus probably became familiar with the Aristotelian corpus in the 1240s at the priory of Saint Jacques in Paris. The Arab commentators from whom he learned his Aristotle worked in an environment in which astronomical questions were taken very seriously, and, atypically for his time, Albertus himself pursued such questions.

Albertus developed two notable doctrines. The first was the view that the Milky Way was not a sublunary exhalation (as Aristotle had urged) but rather a configuration of stars. He was cited by defenders of this view, most notably Gaetano di Thiene, in the 15th and 16th centuries

Second, like many medieval and Renaissance natural philosophers, Albertus was unhappy about Ptolemy's eccentrics and epicycles, wondering what physical rationale they could have. Despite the difficulties in reconciling them with the observed motions of celestial bodies, particularly those of the planets, Albertus preferred the homocentric account of celestial motions. The question is complicated, however, by the fact that he distinguished between the mathematical accounts of celestial motion and the natural-philosophical (physical) ones. To a large extent, this prevents the two sets of considerations from coming into conflict, so that the irreconcilability of the physical arguments on the one hand, and the mathematical and observational arguments on the other, is not as evident as it became in the 16th century Indeed, in some respects Albert set in motion a very problematic division of responsibilities with regard to astronomical questions, which fitted in well with the delicate balancing act that the introduction of Aristotelian philosophy required, but which turned out to be quite artificial.

Albert's natural-philosophical and astronomical writings are to be found principally in his commentaries on Aristotle.

Stephen Gaukroger

Alternate name

Albertus Magnus

Selected Reference

Albertus Magnus (1890-1899). Opera omnia, edited by Augusti Borgnet. Paris