



Rise of the Philosophical Renaissance

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For a thousand years after the schools of Athens were closed by Justinian philosophy made no real advance; no essentially new ideas about the constitution of nature, the workings of mind, or the ends of life were put forward. It would be false to say that during this period no progress was made. The civilisation of the Roman Empire was extended far beyond its ancient frontiers; and, although much ground was lost in Asia and Africa, more than the equivalent was gained in Northern Europe. Within Europe also the gradual abolition of slavery and the increasing dignity of peaceful labour gave a wider diffusion to culture, combined with a larger sense of human fellowship than any but the best minds of Greece and Rome had felt. Whether the status of women was really raised may be doubted; but the ideas and sentiments of women began to exercise an influence on social intercourse unknown before. And the arts of war and peace were in some ways almost revolutionised.

This remarkable phenomenon of movement in everything except ideas has been explained by the influence of Christianity, or rather of Catholicism. There is truth in the contention, but it is not the whole truth. The Church entered into a heritage that she did not create; she defined and accentuated tendencies that long before her advent had secretly been at work. In the West that diffusion of civilisation which is her historic boast had been begun and carried far by the Rome whence her very name is taken. In the East the title of orthodox by which the Greek Church is distinguished betrays the presence of that Greek thought which moulded her dogmas into logical shape. What is more, the very idea of right belief as a vital and saving thing came to Christianity from Platonism, accompanied by the persuasion that wrong belief was immoral and its promulgation a crime to be visited by the penalty of death.

Ecclesiastical intolerance has been made responsible for the speculative stagnation of the Middle Ages, and it has been explained as an effect of the belief in the future punishment of heresy by eternal torments. But in truth the persecuting spirit was responsible for the dogma, not the dogma for persecution. And we must look for the underlying cause of the whole evil in the premature union of metaphysics with religion and morality first effected by Plato, or rather by the genius of Athens working through Plato. Indeed, on a closer examination we shall find that the slowing-down of speculation had begun long before the advent of Christianity, and coincides with the establishment of its headquarters at Athens, where also the first permanent schools of philosophy were established. These schools were distinctly religious in their character; and none was so set against innovation as that of Epicurus, falsely supposed to have been a home of freethought. In the last Greek system of philosophy, Neo-Platonism, theology reigned supreme; and during the two and a-half centuries of its existence no real advance on the teaching of Plotinus was made.

Neo-Platonism when first constituted had incorporated a large Aristotelian element, the expulsion of which had been accomplished by its last great master, Proclus; and Christendom took over metaphysics under what seemed a Platonic form—the more welcome as Plato passed for giving its creeds the independent support of pure reason. This support extended beyond a future life and went down to the deepest mysteries of revealed faith. For, according to the

Platonic doctrine of ideas, it was quite in order that there should be a divine unity existing independently of the three divine persons composing it; that the idea of humanity should be combined with one of these persons; and that the same idea, being both one with and distinct from Adam, should involve all mankind in the guilt of his transgression. Thus the Church started with a strong prejudice in favour of Plato which continued to operate for many centuries, although the first great schoolman, John Scotus Eriugena (810-877), incurred a condemnation for heresy by adopting the pantheistic metaphysics of Neo-Platonism.

As the Platonic doctrine of ideas came to life again in the realism, as it was called, of scholastic philosophy, so the conflicting view of his old opponent Aristotle was revived under the form of conceptualism. According to this theory the genera and species of the objective world correspond to real and permanent distinctions in the nature of things; but, apart from the conceptions by which they are represented in the intellect of God and man, those distinctions have no separate existence. Aristotle's philosophy was first brought into Europe by the Mohammedan conquerors of Spain, which became an important centre of learning in the earlier Middle Ages. Not a few Christian scholars went there to study. Latin translations were made from Arabic versions of Aristotle, and in this way his doctrines became more widely known to the lecture-rooms of the Catholic world. But their derivation from infidel sources roused a prejudice against them, still further heightened by the circumstance that an Arabian commentator, Averroes, had interpreted the theology of the *Metaphysics* in a pantheistic sense. And on any sincere reading Aristotle denied the soul's immortality which Plato had upheld. Accordingly, all through the twelfth century Platonism still dominated religious thought, and even so late as the early thirteenth century the study of Aristotle was still condemned by the Church.

Nevertheless a great revolution was already in progress. As a result of the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders in A.D. 1204 the Greek manuscripts of Aristotle's writings were brought to Paris, and at a subsequent period they were translated into Latin under the direction of St. Thomas Aquinas, the ablest of the schoolmen, who so manipulated the Peripatetic philosophy as to convert it from a battering-ram into a buttress of Catholic theology—a position still officially assigned to it at the present day. Aristotelianism, however, did not reign without a rival even in the later Middle Ages. Aquinas was a Dominican; and the jealousy of the competing Franciscan Order found expression in maintaining a certain tradition of Platonism, represented in different ways by Roger Bacon (1214-1294) and by Duns Scotus (1265-1308). In this connection we have to note the extraordinary fertility of the British islands in eminent thinkers during the Middle Ages. Besides the two last mentioned there is Eriugena ("born in Ireland"), John of Salisbury (1115-1180), the first Humanist, William of Ockham, and Wycliffe, the first reformer—making six in all, a larger contribution than any other region of Europe, or indeed all the rest of Europe put together, has made to the stars of Scholasticism. This advantage is probably not due to any inherent genius for philosophy in the inhabitants of these islands, but to their relative immunity from war and to the political liberty that cannot but have been favourable to independent thought. Five out of the six were more or less inclined to Platonism, and their idealist or mystical tendencies were sometimes associated with the same practicality that distinguished their master. The sixth, commonly called Occam (died about 1349), is famous as the champion of Nominalism—that is, of the doctrine that genera and species have no real existence either in nature or in mind; there are only individuals more or less resembling one another. He is the author of the famous saying—the sole legacy of Scholasticism to common thought: "Entities ought not to be gratuitously multiplied" (*entia non sunt praeter necessitate multiplicanda*).

The capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders had led to Aristotle's triumph in the

thirteenth century. Two hundred years later the conquering Ottoman advance on the same city was the immediate cause of his overthrow. For the Byzantine scholars who fled for help and refuge to Italy brought with them the manuscripts of Plato and Plotinus, and these soon became known to Western Europe through the Latin translations of Marsilio Ficino. On its literary side the Platonic revival fell in admirably with the Humanism to which the Schoolmen had long been intensely distasteful. And the religious movement that preceded Luther's Reformation found a welcome ally in Neo-Platonic mysticism. At the same time the invention of printing, by opening the world of books to non-academic readers, vastly widened the possibilities of independent thought. And the Reformation, by discrediting the scholastic theology in Northern Europe, dealt another blow at the system with which it had been associated by Aquinas.

It has been supposed that the discovery of America and the circumnavigation of the globe contributed also to the impending philosophical revolution. But the true theory of the earth's figure formed the very foundation of Aristotle's cosmology, and was as well-known to Dante as to ourselves. Made by a fervent Catholic, acting under the patronage of the Catholic queen *par excellence*, the discovery of Columbus increased the prestige of Catholicism by opening a new world to its missions and adding to the wealth of its supporters in the Old World.

The decisive blow to medieval ideas came from another quarter—from the Copernican astronomy. What the true theory of the earth's motion meant for philosophy has not always been rightly understood. It seems to be commonly supposed that the heliocentric system excited hostility because it degraded the earth from her proud position as centre of the universe. But the reverse is true. According to Aristotle and his scholastic followers, the centre of the universe is the lowest and least honourable, the circumference the highest and most distinguished position in it. And that is why earth, as the vilest of the four elements, tends to the centre; while fire, being the most precious, flies upward. Again, the incorruptible aether of which the heavens are composed shows its eternal character by moving for ever round in a circle of which God, as Prime Mover, occupies the outermost verge. And this metaphysical topography is faithfully followed by Dante, who even improves on it by placing the worst criminals (that is, the rebels and traitors—Satan, with Judas and Brutus and Cassius) in the eternal ice at the very centre of the earth. Such fancies were incompatible with the new astronomy. No longer cold and dead, our earth might henceforth take her place among the stars, animated like them—if animated they were—and suggesting by analogy that they too supported teeming multitudes of reasonable inhabitants.

Alfred William Benn. *History of Modern Philosophy*. London: Watts and Co, 1912.

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