ALFRED BENN

HISTORY OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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Benn A.

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Содержание

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Chapter I.
THE PHILOSOPHICAL RENAISSANCE

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 præter necessitatem 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 æther 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.

But the transposition of values did not end here. Aristotle's whole philosophy had been based on a radical antithesis between the sublunary and the superlunary spheres – the world of growth, decay, vicissitude, and the world of everlasting realities. In the sublunary sphere, also, it distinguished sharply between the Forms of things, which were eternal, and the Matter on which they were imposed, an intangible, evanescent thing related to Form as Possibility to Actuality. We know that these two convenient categories are logically independent of the false cosmology that may or may not have suggested their world-wide application. But the immediate effect of having it denied, or even doubted, was greatly to exalt the credit of Matter or Power at the expense of Form or Act.

The first to draw these revolutionary inferences from the Copernican theory was Giordano Bruno (1548-1600). Born at Nola, a south Italian city not far from Naples, Bruno entered the Dominican Order before the age of fifteen, and on that occasion exchanged his baptismal name of Filippo for that by which he has ever since been known. Here he became acquainted with the whole of ancient and medieval philosophy, besides the Copernican astronomy, then not yet condemned by the Church. At the early age of eighteen he first came into collision with the authorities; and at twenty-eight (1576) [McIntyre, pp. 9-10] he openly questioned the chief characteristic dogmas of Catholicism, was menaced with an action for heresy, and fled from the convent. The pursuit must have been rather perfunctory, for Bruno found himself free to spend two years wandering from one Italian city to another, earning a precarious livelihood by tuition and authorship. Leaving Italy at last, rather from a desire to push his fortunes abroad than from any fear of molestation, and finding France too hot to hold him, he tried Geneva for a little while, but, on being given to understand that he could only stay on the condition of embracing Calvinism, returned to France, where he lived first for two years as Professor of Philosophy at Toulouse, and three more in a somewhat less official position at Paris. Thence, in the train of the French ambassador, he passed to England, where his two years' sojourn seems to have been the happiest and most fruitful period of his restless career. It was cut short by his chief's return to Paris. But the philosopher's fearless advocacy of Copernicanism made that bigoted capital impossible. The truth, however, seems to be that Bruno never could hit it off

with anyone or any society; and the next five years, spent in trying to make himself acceptable at one German university after another, are a record of hopeless failure. Finally, in an evil hour, he goes to Venice at the invitation of a young noble, Mocenigo, who, in revenge for disappointed expectations, betrays him to the Inquisition. Questioned about his heresies, Bruno showed perfect willingness to accept all the theological dogmas that he had formerly denied. Whether he withdrew his retractation on being transferred from a Venetian to a Roman prison does not appear, as the Roman depositions are not forthcoming. Neither is it clear why so long a delay as six years (1594-1600) was granted to the philosopher when such short work was made of other heretics. It seems most probable that Bruno, while pliant enough on questions of religious belief, remained inflexible in maintaining the infinity of inhabited worlds. When the final condemnation was read out, he told the judges that he heard it with less fear than they felt in pronouncing it. In the customary euphemistic terms they had sent him to death by fire. At the stake, when the crucifix was held up to him, he turned away his eyes – with what thoughts we cannot tell. There is a monument to the heroic thinker at Nola, and another in the Campo dei Fiori on the spot where he suffered at Rome, raised against the strongest protests of the ecclesiastical authorities.

The Greek-Italian philosophers – the Pythagoreans and Parmenides – had introduced the idea of finiteness or Limitation as a necessary condition of reality and perfection into thought. From them it passed over to Plato and Aristotle, who made it dominant in the schools. Epicurus and Lucretius had, indeed, carried on the older Ionian tradition of infinite atoms and infinite worlds dispersed through infinite space; but their philosophy was practically atheistic, and the Church condemned it as both heretical and false. Probably the discovery of the earth's globular shape had first suggested the idea of a finite universe to Parmenides; at any rate, the discovery of the earth's motion suggested the idea of an infinite universe to his Greek-souled Italian successor; or rather it was the break-up of Aristotle's spherical world by Copernicanism that threw Bruno back – as he gives us himself to understand – on the older Ionian cosmologies, with their assumption of infinite space and infinite worlds. In this reference Bruno went far beyond Copernicus, and even Kepler; for both had assumed, in deference to current opinion, that the fixed stars were equidistant from the solar system, and formed a single sphere enclosing it on all sides. He, on the contrary, anticipated modern astronomy in conceiving the stars as so many suns dispersed without assignable limits through space, and each surrounded by inhabited planets.

Infinite space had been closely associated by Democritus and Epicurus with infinite atoms; and the next great step taken by Bruno was to rehabilitate atomism as a necessary concept of modern science. He figured the atoms as very minute spheres of solid earthy matter, forming by their combinations the framework of visible bodies. But their combinations are by no means fortuitous, as Democritus had impiously supposed; nor do they move through an absolute void. All space is filled with an ocean of liquid æther, which is no other than the quintessence of which Aristotle's celestial spheres were composed. Only in Bruno's system it takes the place of that First Matter which is the extreme antithesis of the disembodied Form personified in the Prime Mover, God. And here we come to that reversal of cosmic values brought about by the reversal of the relations between the earth and sun which Copernicus had effected. The primordial Matter, so far from passively receiving the Forms imposed on it from without, has an infinite capacity for evolving Forms from its own bosom; and, so far from being unspiritual, is itself the universal spirit, the creative and animating soul of the world. The First Matter, Form, Energy, Life, and Reason are identified with Nature, Nature with the Universe, and the Universe with God.

So far all is clear, if not convincing. It is otherwise with the theory of Monads. This is only expounded in Bruno's Latin works, for the most part ill-written and hopelessly obscure. It seems possible that by the monads Bruno sometimes means the infinitesimal parts into which the æther of space may conceivably be divided. Each of these possesses consciousness, and therefore may be considered as reflecting and representing the whole universe. A number of monads, or rather a

continuous portion of the æther surrounding and interpenetrating a group of atoms, endows them with the forms and qualities of elementary bodies, ascending gradually through vegetal and animal organisations to human beings. But the animating process does not stop with man. The earth, with the other planets, the sun, and all the stars, are also monads on the largest scale, with reasonable souls, just as Aristotle thought. In fact, the old mythology whence he derived the idea repeats itself in his great enemy Bruno.

Beyond and above all these partial unities is the Monas Monadum – the supreme unity, the infinite God who is the soul of the infinite universe. Doubtless there is here a reminiscence of the Neo-Platonic One, the ineffable Absolute, beyond all existence, yet endowed with the infinite power whence all existence proceeds. Bruno had learned from Cardinal Nicolas of Cusa – a Copernican before Copernicus – to recognise the principle of Heracleitus that opposites are one; and in this instance he applies it with brilliant audacity; for every infinitesimal part of the space-filling æther is no less the soul of the universe than the Monad of Monads itself. And both agree in being non-existent in the sense of being transfinite, since there can be no sum of infinity and no animated mathematical points.

From Anaximander to Plotinus there is hardly a great Greek thinker whose influence cannot be traced in the system of Giordano Bruno. And while he represents the philosophical Renaissance in this eminent degree, he heads the two lines of speculation which, separately or combined, run through the whole history of modern metaphysics – the monistic, and what is now called the pluralistic tendency. With none, except, perhaps, with Hegel, have the two been perfectly balanced; and in Bruno himself the leaning is distinctly towards plurality, his Supreme Monad being a mere survival from the Neo-Platonic One.

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was by profession a lawyer, by taste a scientific inquirer, by character a seeker after wealth and power, by natural genius an immortal master of words. He began life as the friend, adviser, and client of Elizabeth's favourite, the Earl of Essex. When that unfortunate courtier, in disregard of his warnings, rushed into a treasonable enterprise, Bacon appeared as one of the most zealous of the counsel for the prosecution. Strictly speaking, this may have been his duty as a loyal subject of the Queen; it was hardly his duty, even on the Queen's commission, after Essex's execution, to assist in the composition of a pamphlet blackening the memory of his former friend and patron. In the next reign Bacon paid assiduous court to James and his favourites.

When the first of these, Somerset, fell and was tried on a charge of murder, he conducted the prosecution, and, finding the evidence insufficient, suggested to James that the prisoner should be entrapped into a confession by dangling a false promise of forgiveness before his eyes. Bacon owed his final exaltation to Buckingham, and as Lord Keeper allowed himself to be made the tool of that bad man for the perversion of justice. A suit was brought before him by a young man against a fraudulent trustee (his own uncle) for the restitution of a sum of money. Bacon gave sentence for the plaintiff. Buckingham then intervened with a demand that the case should be retried. "Upon this Bacon saw the parties privately, and, annulling all the deliberate decisions of the Court, compelled the youth to assent to the ceasing of all proceedings, and to accept" a smaller sum than he was entitled to (E. A. Abbott). On another occasion he exercised his judicial authority in a way that did not square with Buckingham's wishes, but quite legitimately and without any consciousness of giving offence; whereupon the insolent favourite addressed him in a letter filled with outrageous abuse, to which Bacon replied in terms of abject submission. This meanness had its reward, for in 1618 the philosopher became Lord Chancellor.

After a three years' tenure Bacon was flung from his high position by a charge of judicial corruption, to the truth of every count in which he confessed. The question is very complicated,

obscure, and much controverted, not admitting of discussion within the limits here assigned. On the subject of Bacon's truthfulness, however, a word must be said. The Chancellor admitted having taken presents from suitors, but denied having ever let his judgments be influenced thereby; and his word seems to be generally accepted as a sufficient exoneration. But its value may be doubted in view of two statements quoted by Dean Church. Of these "one was made in the House of Commons by Sir George Hastings, a member of the House, who had been the channel of Awbry's gift [made to the Chancellor *pendente lite*], that when he had told Bacon that if questioned he must admit it, Bacon's answer was: 'George, if you do so, I must deny it, upon my honour – upon my oath.' The other was that he had given an opinion in favour of some claim of the Masters in Chancery, for which he received £1,200, and with which he said that all the judges agreed – an assertion which all the judges denied. Of these charges there is no contradiction." The denial of Bacon that he ever allowed his judgments to be influenced by bribes, and his assertion that he was the justest judge since his own father, cannot, then, count for much. As to the plea that the justice of his sentences was never challenged, who was to challenge it? The successful suitor would hold his tongue; and the unsuccessful suitor could hardly be expected to complete his own ruin by going to law again on the strength of the Chancellor's condemnation.

Bacon, at any rate, knew quite well that to take presents before judgment was wrong and criminal, as his answer to Egerton sufficiently shows – an answer which also fully disposes of the plea that to take such presents was the common custom of the age. Moreover, had such been the common custom, Bacon might have taken his trial and pleaded it as a sufficient apology or extenuation for his own conduct. This would have been a somewhat more dignified course than the one he actually pursued, which was to plead guilty to all the charges, throwing himself on the mercy of the Lords. It has been suggested that he did this at the desire of his powerful patrons, whose malpractices might have been brought to light by a public investigation. As his punishment was immediately remitted, some arrangement with the King and Buckingham seems probable. But for an innocent man to have saved himself by a false acknowledgment of guilt would, as Macaulay shows, have been still more infamous than to take bribes.

The desperate efforts of some apologists to whitewash Bacon are apparently due to a very exaggerated estimate of his services to mankind. Other critics give themselves the pleasure of painting what has been called a Rembrandt portrait, with noon on the forehead and night at the heart. And a third class argue from a rotten morality to a rotten intelligence. In fact, Bacon as little deserves to be called the wisest and greatest as the meanest of mankind. He really loved humanity, and tried hard to serve it, devoting a truly philosophical intellect to that end. The service was to consist in an immense extension of man's power over nature, to be obtained by a complete knowledge of her secrets; and this knowledge he hoped to win by reforming the methods of scientific investigation. Unfortunately, intellect alone proved unequal to that mighty task. Bacon passes, and not without good grounds, for a great upholder of the principle that truth can only be learned by experience. But his philosophy starts by setting that principle at defiance. He who took all knowledge for his province omitted from his survey the rather important subject of knowledge itself, its limits and its laws. Had his attention been drawn that way, the very first requisite, on empirical principles, would have been to take stock of the leading truths already ascertained. But the enormous vanity of the amateur reformer seems to have persuaded him that these amounted to little or nothing. The later Renaissance was an age of intense scientific activity, conditioned, in the first instance, by a revival of Greek learning. Already before the middle of the sixteenth century great advance had been made in algebra, trigonometry, astronomy, mineralogy, botany, anatomy, and physiology. Before the publication of the *Novum Organum* Napier had invented logarithms, Galileo was reconstituting physics, Gilbert had created the science of magnetism, and Harvey had discovered the circulation of the blood. These were facts that Bacon took no pains to study; he either ignores or slights or denies the work done by his illustrious predecessors and contemporaries. That he rejected the Copernican theory with scorn

is an exaggeration; but he never accepted it, notwithstanding arguments that the best astronomers of his time found convincing; and the longer he lived the more unfavourable became his opinion of its merits. And it is certain that Tycho Brahe's wonderful mass of observations, with the splendid generalisations based on them by Kepler, are never mentioned in his writings. Now what really ruined Aristotelianism was the heliocentric astronomy, as Bruno perfectly saw; and ignorance of this left Bacon after all in the bonds of medieval philosophy.

We have seen in studying Bruno that the very soul of Aristotle's system was his distinction between form and matter, and this distinction Bacon accepted without examination from scholasticism. The purpose of his life was to ascertain by what combination of forms each particular body was constituted, and then, by artificially superinducing them on some portion of matter, to call the desired substance into existence. His celebrated inductive method was devised as a means to that end. To discover the forms "we are instructed first to draw up exhaustive tables of the phenomena and forms under investigation, and then to exclude from our list any 'form' which does not invariably co-exist with the phenomenon of which *the* form is sought. For example, if we are trying to discover the form of heat it will not do to adduce 'celestial nature'; for, though the sun's light is hot, that of the moon is cold. After a series of such *exclusions*, Bacon believed that a single form would finally remain to be the invariable cause of the phenomenon investigated, and of nothing else" (F. C. S. Schiller).

As Dr. Schiller observes, this *method of exclusions* is not new; nor, indeed, does Bacon claim to have originated it; at least he observes in his *Novum Organum* that it had been already employed by Plato to a certain extent for the purpose of discussing definitions and ideas. And elsewhere he praises Plato as "a man (and one that surveyed all things from a lofty cliff) for having discerned in his doctrine of Ideas that Forms were the true object of knowledge; howsoever he lost the fruit of this most true opinion by considering and trying to apprehend Forms as absolutely abstracted from matter, whence it came that he turned aside to theological speculations." Bacon must have known that this reproach does not apply to Aristotle; as, indeed, the very schoolmen knew that he did not – except in the single case of God – give Forms a separate existence. But, probably from jealousy, he specially hated Aristotle, and in this particular instance the Stagirite more particularly excited his hostility by identifying Forms with Final Causes. These Bacon rather contemptuously handed over to the sole cognisance of theology as consecrated virgins bearing no fruit. As a point of scientific method this condemnation of teleology is quite unjustified even in the eyes of inquirers who reject the theological argument from design. To a Darwinian, purpose means survival value, and the parts of an organism are so many utilities evolved in the action and reaction between living beings and their environment. But Bacon disliked any theory tending to glorify the existing arrangements of nature as perfect and unalterable achievements, for the good reason that it threatened to discountenance his own scheme for practically creating the world over again with exclusive reference to the good of humanity. Thus in his Utopia, the *New Atlantis*, there are artificial mines, producing artificial metals, plants raised without seeds, contrivances for turning one tree or plant into another, for prolonging the lives of animals after the removal of particular organs, for making "a number of kinds of serpents, worms, flies, fishes of putrefaction; whereof some are advanced to be perfect creatures like beasts or birds"; with flying-machines, submarines, and perpetual motions – in short, a general anticipation of Jules Verne and Mr. H. G. Wells.

Such dreams, however, do not entitle Bacon to be regarded as a true prophet of modern science and modern mechanical inventions. In themselves his ideas do not go beyond the magic of the Middle Ages, or rather of all ages. The original thing was his Method; and this Method, considered as a means for surprising the secrets of nature, we know to be completely chimerical, because there are no such Forms as he imagined, to be enucleated by induction, with or without the Method of Exclusion. The truth is that the inductive method which he borrowed from Socrates and Plato was originally created by Athenian philosophy for the humanistic studies of law, morality, æsthetics, and psychology. Physical science, on the other hand, should be approached, as the Greeks rightly felt, through the door

of mathematics, an instrument of whose potency the great Chancellor notoriously had no conception. Thus his prodigious powers would have been much more usefully devoted to moral philosophy. As it is, the *Essays* alone remain to show what great things he might have done by limiting himself to the subjects with which they deal. The famous logical and physical treatises, the *Novum Organum* and the *De Augmentis*, notwithstanding their wealth and splendour of language, are to us at the present day less living than the fragments of early Greek thought, than most of Plato, than much of Aristotle, than Atomism as expounded by Lucretius.

Macaulay rests his claim of the highest place among philosophers for Bacon not on his inductive theory, to which the historian rightly denies any novelty, but on the new purpose and direction that the search for knowledge is assumed to have received from his teaching. On this view the whole of modern science has been created by the desire to convert nature into an instrument for the satisfaction of human wants – an ambition dating from the publication of the *Novum Organum*. The claim will not stand, for two reasons. The first is that the great movement of modern science began at least half a century before Bacon's birth, growing rapidly during his life, but without his knowledge, and continuing its course without being perceptibly accelerated by his intervention ever since. The one man of science who most commonly passes for his disciple is Robert Boyle (1627-1691). But Boyle did not read the *Novum Organum* before he was thirty, whereas, residing at Florence before fifteen, he received a powerful stimulus from the study of Galileo. And his chemistry was based on the atomic theory which Bacon rejected.

The second reason for not accepting Macaulay's claim is that in modern Europe no less than in ancient Greece the great advances in science have only been made by those who loved knowledge for its own sake, or, if the expression be preferred, simply for the gratification of their intellectual curiosity. No doubt their discoveries have added enormously to the utilities of life; but such advantages have been gained on the sole condition of not making them the primary end in view. The labours of Bacon's own contemporaries, Kepler and Gilbert, have led to the navigation of the sea by lunar distances, and to the various industrial applications of electro-magnetism; but they were undertaken without a dream of these remote results. And in our own day the greatest of scientific triumphs, which is the theory of evolution, was neither worked out with any hope of material benefits to mankind nor has it offered any prospect of them as yet. The same may be said of modern sidereal astronomy. From the humanist point of view it would not be easy to justify the enormous expenditure of energy, money, and time that this science has absorbed. The schoolmen have been much ridiculed for discussing the question how many angels could dance on the point of a needle; but as a purely speculative problem it surely merits as much attention as the total number of the stars, the rates of their velocities, or the law of their distribution through space. A schoolman might even have urged in justification of his curiosity that some of us might feel a reasonable curiosity about the exact size – if size they have – of beings with whom we hope to associate one day; whereas by the confession of the astronomers themselves neither we nor our descendants can ever hope to verify by direct measurement the precarious guesses of their science in this branch of celestial statics and dynamics.

Thomas Hobbes

It has been shown that one momentous effect of the Copernican astronomy, as interpreted by Giordano Bruno, was to reverse the relative importance ascribed in Aristotle's philosophy to the two great categories of Power and Act, giving to Power a value and dignity of which it had been stripped by the judgment of Plato and Aristotle. Even Epicurus, when he rehabilitated infinite space, had been careful as a moralist to urge the expediency of placing a close limitation on human desires, denouncing the excesses of avarice and ambition more mildly but not less decisively than the contemporary Stoic school. Thus Lucretius describes his master as travelling beyond the flaming walls of the world only

that he may bring us back a knowledge of the fixed barrier set by the very laws of existence to our aspirations and hopes.

The classic revival of the Renaissance did not bring back the Greek spirit of moderation. On the contrary, the new world, the new astronomy, the new monarchy, and the new religion combined to create such a sense of Power, in contradistinction to Act, as the world had never before known. For us this new feeling has received its most triumphant artistic expression from Shakespeare and Milton, for France from Rabelais, for Italy from Ariosto and Michelangelo. In philosophy Bacon strikes the same note when he values knowledge as a source of power – knowledge which for Greek philosophy meant rather a lesson in self-restraint. And this idea receives a further development from Bacon's chief successor in English philosophy, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), in whose system love of power figures as the very essence of human nature, the self-conscious manifestation of that Motion which is the real substance of the physical world.

Hobbes was a precocious child, and received a good school training; but the five years he spent at Oxford added nothing to his information, and a continental tour with the young heir of the Cavendishes had no other effect than to convince him of the general contempt into which the scholasticism still taught at Oxford had fallen. On returning to England, he began his studies over again in the Cavendish library, acquiring a thorough familiarity with the classic literature of Greece and Rome, a deep hatred (imbibed through Thucydides) of democracy, and a genuinely antique theory that the State should be supreme in religious no less than in civil matters. Amid these studies Hobbes occasionally enjoyed the society of Bacon, then spending his last years in the retirement of Gorhambury. As secretary and Latin translator he proved serviceable to the ex-Chancellor, but remained quite unaffected by his inductive and experimental philosophy. Indeed, the determining impulse of his speculative activity came from the opposite quarter. Going abroad once more as travelling tutor, at the age of forty, he chanced on a copy of Euclid in a gentleman's library lying open at the famous Forty-Seventh Proposition. His first impulse was to reject the theorem as impossible; but, on going backwards from proposition to proposition, he laid down the book not only convinced, but "in love with geometry."

Beginning so late in life, his ulterior studies led Hobbes into the belief that he had squared the circle, besides the far more pernicious error of applying the deductive method of geometry to the solution of political problems. Could he and Bacon have exchanged philosophies, the brilliant faculties of each might have been employed to better purpose. The categories of Form and Matter, combined with the logic of elimination and tentative generalisation, would have found a fitting field for their application in the familiar facts of human nature. But those facts refused to be treated as so many wheels, pulleys, and cords in a machine for crushing the life out of society and transmitting the will of a single despot unresisted through its whole extent; for such is a faithful picture of what a well-governed community, as Hobbes conceived it, ought to be. During his second residence abroad he had become acquainted with the physical philosophy of Galileo – the theory that regards every change in the external or phenomenal world as a mere rearrangement of matter and motion, matter being an aggregate of independent molecules held together by mechanical pressure and impact. The component parts of this aggregate become known to us by the impressions their movements produce on our senses, traces of which are preserved in memory, and subsequently recalled by association. Language consists of signs conventionally affixed to such images; only the signs, standing as they do for all objects of a certain sort, have a universal value, not possessed by the original sensations, through which reasoning becomes possible. Hobbes had evidently fallen in love with algebra as well as with geometry; and it is on the type of algebraic reasoning – in other words, on the type of rigorous deduction – that his logic is constructed. And such a view of the way in which knowledge advances seemed amply justified by the scientific triumphs of his age. But his principle that all motion originates in antecedent motion, although plausible in itself and occasionally revived by ingenious speculators, has not been verified by modern science. Gravitation, cohesion, and chemical affinity

have, so far, to be accepted as facts not resoluble into more general facts. Hobbes died before the great discoveries of Newton which first turned away men's minds from the purely mechanical interpretation of energy.

That mechanical interpretation led our philosopher to reject Aristotle's notion of sociality as an essentially human characteristic. To him this seemed a mere occult quality, the substitution of a word for an explanation. The counter-view put forth in his great work, *Leviathan*, is commonly called atomistic. But it would be gross flattery to compare the ultimate elements of society, as Hobbes conceived them, to the molecules of modern science, which attract as well as repel each other; or even with the Democritean atoms, which are at least neutral. According to him, the tendency to self-preservation, shared by men with all other beings, takes the form of an insatiable appetite for power, leading each individual to pursue his own aggrandisement at the cost of any loss or suffering to the rest. And he tries to prove the permanence of this impulse by referring to the precautions against robbery taken by householders and travellers. Aristotle had much more justly mentioned the kindnesses shown to travellers as a proof of how widely goodwill is diffused. Our countryman, with all his acuteness, strangely ignores the necessity as a matter of prudence of going armed and locking the door at night, even if the robbers only amounted to one in a thousand of the population. Modern researches have shown that there are very primitive societies where the assumed war of all against each is unknown, predatory conflicts being a mark of more advanced civilisation, and the cause rather than the effect of anti-social impulses.

Granting an original state of anarchy and internecine hostility, there is, according to Hobbes, only one way out of it, which is a joint resolution of the whole community to surrender their rights of individual sovereignty into the hands of one man, who thenceforth becomes absolute ruler of the State, with authority to defend its citizens against mutual aggressions, and the whole community against attacks from a foreign Power. This agreement constitutes the famous Social Contract, of which so much was to be heard during the next century and a-half. It holds as between the citizens themselves, but not between the subjects and their sovereign, for that would be admitting a responsibility which there is no power to enforce. And anyone refusing to obey the sovereign justly forfeits his life; for he thereby returns to the State of Nature, where any man that likes may kill his neighbour if he can.

All this theory of an original institution of the State by contract impresses a modern reader as utterly unhistorical. But its value, if any, does not depend on its historical truth. Even if the remote ancestors of the seventeenth-century Europeans had surrendered all their individual rights, with certain trifling exceptions, into the hands of an autocrat, no sophistry could show that their mutual engagements were binding on the subjects of Charles I. and Louis XIV. And it is really on expediency, understood in the largest sense, that the claims of the New Monarchy are based by Hobbes. What he maintains is that nothing short of a despotic government exercised by one man can save society from relapsing into chaos. But even under this amended form the theory remains amenable to historical criticism. Had Hobbes pursued his studies beyond Thucydides, he would have found that other polities besides the Athenian democracy broke down at the hour of trial. Above all, Roman Imperialism, which seems to have been his ideal, failed to secure its subjects either against internal disorder or against foreign invasion.

Democracy, however, was not the sole or the worst enemy dreaded by the author of *Leviathan* as a competitor with his "mortal god." In the frontispiece of that work the deified monarch who holds the sword erect with his right hand grasps the crozier with his left, thus typifying the union of the spiritual and temporal powers in the same person. The publicists of the Italian Renaissance, with their classical ideals, had, indeed, been as anti-papal as the Protestants; and the political disorders fomented by the agents of the Catholic reaction during the last hundred years had given Hobbes an additional reason for perpetuating their point of view. Meanwhile another menace to public order had presented itself from an opposite quarter. Calvinism had created a new spiritual power based on the free individual interpretation of Scripture, in close alliance with the alleged rights of conscience

and with the spirit of republican liberty. Each creed in turn had attacked the Stuart monarchy, and the second had just effected its overthrow. Therefore, to save the State it was necessary that religious creeds, no less than codes of conduct, should be dictated by the secular authority, enslaving men's minds as well as their bodies.

By the dialectic irony of the speculative movement, this attempt to fetter opinion was turned into an instrument for its more complete emancipation. In order to discredit the pretensions of the religious zealots, Hobbes made a series of attacks on the foundations of their faith, mostly by way of suggestion and innuendo – no more being possible under the conditions then obtaining – but with such effect that, according to Macaulay, "for many years the *Leviathan* was the gospel of cold-blooded and hard-headed unbelievers." That one who made religious belief a matter to be fixed by legislation could be in any sense a Christian seems most unlikely. He professed, with what sincerity we know not, to regard the existence of God as something only a fool could deny. But his philosophy from beginning to end forms a rigorously-thought-out system of materialism which any atheist, if otherwise it satisfied him, might without inconsistency accept.

On the meeting of the Long Parliament, Hobbes again left England for the Continent, where he remained for eleven years. But his principles were no more to the taste of the exiled royalists than of their opponents. He therefore returned once more to England, made his submission to the Parliament, and spent the rest of his days, practically unmolested by either party, under the Commonwealth and the Restoration until his death in 1679 at the age of ninety-one.

It may be said of Hobbes, as of Bacon, that the intellect at work is so amazing and the mass of literary performance so imposing that the illusions of historians about the value of their contributions to the progress of thought are excusable. Nevertheless, it cannot be too distinctly stated that the current or academic estimate of these great men as having effected a revolution in physical and moral science is wrong. They stand as much apart from the true line of evolution as do the gigantic saurians of a remote geological period whose remains excite our wonder in museums of natural history. Their systems proved as futile as the monarchies of Philip II. and of Louis XIV. Bacon's dreams are no more related to the coming victories of science than Raleigh's El Dorado was to the future colonial empire of Britain. Hobbes had better fortune than Strafford, in so far as he kept his head on his shoulders; but the logic of his absolutism shrivelled up under the sun of English liberty like the great Minister's policy of Thorough.

The theory of a Social Contract is a speculative idea of the highest practical importance. But the idea of contract as the foundation of morals goes back to Epicurus, and it is assumed in a more developed form by Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*. Its potency as a revolutionary instrument comes from the reinterpretations of Locke and Rousseau, which run directly counter to the assumptions of the *Leviathan*.

Hobbes shares with Bacon the belief that all knowledge comes from experience, besides making it clearer than his predecessor that experience of the world comes through external sense alone. Here also there can be no claim to originality, for more than one school of Greek philosophy had said the same. As an element of subsequent thought, more importance belongs to the idea of Power, which was to receive its full development from Spinoza; but only in association with other ideas derived from the philosopher whom we have next to examine, the founder of modern metaphysics, Descartes.

Chapter II.
THE METAPHYSICIANS

Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz

René Descartes (1596-1650) was a Frenchman, born in Touraine, and belonging by family to the inferior nobility. Educated at the Jesuit college of La Flèche, he early acquired a distaste for the scholastic philosophy, or at least for its details; the theology of scholasticism, as we shall see, left a deep impression on him through life. On leaving college he took up mathematics, varied by a short plunge into the dissipations of Paris. Some years of military service as a volunteer with the Catholic armies at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War enabled him to travel and see the world. Returning to Paris, he resumed his studies, but found them seriously interrupted by the tactless bores who, as we know from Molière's amusing comedy *Les Fâcheux,* long continued to infest French society. To escape their assiduities Descartes, who prized solitude before all things, fled the country. The inheritance of an independent income enabled the philosopher to live where he liked; and Holland became, with a few interruptions, his chosen residence for the next twenty years (1629-49). Even here frequent changes of residence and occasional concealment of his address were necessary in order to elude the visits of importunate admirers. With all his unsociability there seems to have been something singularly magnetic about the personality of Descartes; yet he only fell in with one congenial spirit, the Princess Elizabeth, daughter of the unfortunate Winter King and granddaughter of our James I. Possessing to the fullest extent the intellectual brilliancy and the incomparable charm of the Stuart family, this great lady impressed the lonely thinker as the only person who ever understood his philosophy.

Another royal friendship brought his career to an untimely end. Queen Christina of Sweden, the gifted and restless daughter of Gustavus Adolphus, heard of Descartes, and invited him to her Court. On his arrival she sent for the pilot who had brought the illustrious stranger to Stockholm and questioned him about his passenger. "Madame," he replied, "it is not a man whom I conducted to your Majesty, but a demi-god. He taught me more in three weeks of the science of seamanship and of winds and navigation than I had learned in the sixty years I had been at sea" (Miss E. S. Haldane's *Life of René Descartes*). The Queen fully came up to the expectations of her visitor, in whose eyes she had no fault but an unfortunate tendency to waste her time on learning Greek. Besides her other merits, she possessed "a sweetness and goodness which made men devoted to her service." It soon appeared that, as with others of the same rank, this was only the veneer of a heartless selfishness. Christina, who was an early riser, required his attendance in her library to give her lessons in philosophy at five o'clock in the morning. Descartes was by habit a very late riser. Besides, he had not even a lodging in the royal palace, but was staying at the French Embassy, and in going there "had to pass over a long bridge which was always bitterly cold." The cold killed him. He had arrived at Stockholm in October, and meant to leave in January; but remained at the urgent request of the Queen, who, however, made no change in the hour of their interviews, although that winter was one of the severest on record. At the beginning of February, 1650, he fell ill and died of inflammation of the lungs on the 11th, in the fifty-fourth year of his age.

Descartes had the physical courage which Hobbes lacked; but he seems, like Bacon, to have been a moral coward. The most striking instance of this is that, on hearing of Galileo's condemnation for teaching the heliocentric astronomy, he withheld from publication and had even thoughts of destroying a work of his own in which the same doctrine was maintained. This was at a time when he was living in a country where there could be no question of personal danger from the Inquisition.

But something of the same weakness shows itself in his running away from France to escape those intrusions on his studious retirement which one would think might have been checked by letting it be known with sufficient firmness that his hours could not be wasted on idle conversation. And we have seen how at last his life was lost for no better reason than the dread of giving offence to Queen Christina.

It seems strange that a character so unheroic should figure among the great emancipators of human thought. In fact, Descartes's services to liberty have been much exaggerated. His intellectual fame rests on three foundations. Of these the most indubitable is the creation of analytical geometry, the starting-point of modern mathematics. The value of his contributions to physics has been much disputed; but, on the whole, expert opinion seems to have decided that what was new in them was not true, and what was true was not new. However, the place we must assign Descartes in the history of philosophy can only be determined by our opinion of his metaphysics.

As a philosopher Descartes has, to begin with, the merit of exemplary clearness. The fault is not with him if we cannot tell what he thought and how he came to think it. The classic *Discourse on Method* (1637) relates his mental history in a style of almost touching simplicity. It appears that from an early age truth had been his paramount object, not as with Bacon and Hobbes for its utility, but for its own sake. In search of this ideal he read widely, but without finding what he wanted. The great and famous works of literature might entertain or dazzle; they could not convince. The philosophers professed to teach truth; their endless disputes showed that they had not found it. Mathematics, on the other hand, presented a pleasing picture of demonstrated certainty, but a certainty that seemed to be prized only as a sure foundation for the mechanical arts. Wearily throwing his books aside, the young man then applied himself to the great book of life, mingling with all sorts and conditions of men to hear what they had to say about the prime interests of existence. But the same vanity and vexation of spirit followed him here. Men were no more agreed among themselves than were the authorities of his college days. The truths of religion seemed, indeed, to offer a safe refuge; but they were an exception that proved the rule; being, as Descartes observes, a supernatural revelation, not the natural knowledge that he wanted.

The conflict of authorities had at least one good result, which was to discredit the very notion of authority, thus throwing the inquirer back on his own reason as the sole remaining resource. And as mathematics seemed, so far, to be the only satisfactory science, the most reasonable course was to give a wider extension and application to the methods of algebra and geometry. Four fundamental rules were thus obtained: (1) To admit nothing as true that was not evidently so; (2) to analyse every problem into as many distinct questions as the nature of the subject required; (3) to ascend gradually from the simplest to the most complex subjects; and (4) to be sure that his enumerations and surveys were so exhaustive and complete as to let no essential element of the question escape.

The rules as they stand are ill-arranged, vague, and imperfect. The last should come first and the first last. The notions of simplicity, complexity, and truth are neither illustrated nor defined. And no pains are taken to discriminate judgments from concepts. It may be said that the method worked well; at least Descartes tells us that with the help of his rules he made rapid progress in the solution of mathematical problems. We may believe in his success without admitting that an inferior genius could have achieved the same results by the same means. The real point is to ascertain whether the method, whatever its utility in mathematics, could be advantageously applied to metaphysics. And the answer seems to be that as manipulated by its author the new system led to nothing but hopeless fallacies.

After reserving a provisional assent to the customs of the country where he happens to be residing and to the creed of the Roman Church, Descartes begins by calling in question the whole mass of beliefs he has hitherto accepted, including the reality of the external world. But the very act of doubt implies the existence of the doubter himself. I think, therefore I am. It has been supposed that the initial affirmation of this self-evident principle implies that Descartes identified Being with Thought. He did no such thing. No more is meant, to begin with, than that, whatever else is or is

not, I the thinker certainly am. This is no great discovery; the interesting thing is to find out what it implies. A good deal according to Descartes. First he infers that, since the act of thinking assures him of his existence, therefore he is a substance the whole essence of which consists in thought, which is independent of place and of any material object – in short, an immaterial soul, entirely distinct from the body, easier to know, and capable of existing without it. Here the confusion of conception with judgment is apparent, and it leads to a confusion of our thoughts about reality with the realities themselves. And Descartes carries this loose reasoning a step further by going on to argue that, as the certainty of his own existence has no other guarantee than the clearness with which it is inferred from the fact of his thinking, it must therefore be a safe rule to conclude that whatever things we conceive very clearly and distinctly are all true.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.