

Filosofins Historia

Nyare Tiden till Romantiken

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Cogito ergo sum. Those often quoted words by Descartes could fittingly symbolize the beginning of the new philosophy. Admittedly skepticism has a long history, and radical skepticism is like radical pessimism a seductive option. As Collingwood notes, there is a difference between skepticism and criticism, the critic joins you on your journey, the skeptic parts with you at the very beginning. Radical doubt, including that of doubt itself, provides a compelling motive for philosophy. It can be quelled with a sense of overwhelming empirical evidence, such as the consciousness of the doubter; or it can be formally seen to be inconsistent, as doubt also must apply to itself. St. Augustine availed himself of both options. A sceptic like Descartes wants to find rock bottom on which to build. It is in the nature of thought that once you get hold of one end of the rope, one thing will follow each other when you unravel, as it did with Descartes, who after the first overcoming of doubt admits God by a sleigh of hand into the universe, and as a consequence the whole package deal of his creation as well. Descartes was a mathematician of genius, as a speculator on the nature of the physical world, posterity has been less kind to him. His main bequest to modern 20th century philosophy is his notion of duality. The material world and the world of the soul are two different, if parallel universes. This so called Cartesian duality is universally shunned by modern philosophers and scientists engaging with the phenomenon of consciousness, forcing them often to contort themselves into extreme acrobatic positions, as the rejection of dualism appears to be the only boundary condition to which an acceptable answer has to submit. The problem is of course how to explain the way those two universes actually interact. To pose this question is to tacitly assume that there is but one universe and it is the material one to boot. As a subject of principled rational thinking dualism has to be rejected; but as actual emotional human beings, the parallelism of the two universes is something we believe in deeply, in fact not only our practical life, but also most of our thinking life is based on this dichotomy between mind and matter. We speak about intentions of speakers and the meaning of what they are saying as opposed to what is formally written down. The ghost in the machine indeed. Maybe the last vestige of religious thought. But also as the last vestige the most resilient. Does mind emerge out of matter, or is matter only the construction of mind? Bottom up versus top down. This is a central philosophical question, and one which engaged the most serious and sincere of the philosophical thinkers of the 17th and 18th century, which may be conceived as the Golden Age of philosophy¹.

Intellectual life culminated by the late Greeks. Then came the Dark Ages, in which

¹ Total independence, as suggested by the immortality of the soul implicit in Platonism, exalted in Neoplatonism and Christianity, is of course no longer considered a serious option by secular thinkers.

independent thought was suppressed by religious dogmatism. This is the standard picture, and as most standard pictures it has much to recommend itself. Then came the scientific revolution in the 17th century and it brought about a crisis of religion which created a very fertile ground for philosophy. What actually happened? Wedberg chooses to tread lightly on the scientific aspects (it is after all a history of philosophy), on the other hand the philosophical and scientific aspects could not easily be separated at the time.

The relation between religion and serious thinking is a fascinating and complex subject, which is usually only touched upon. In what sense did Catholicism fetter thinking? It certainly did not inhibit free and immoral action, and from the start there was a division into the worldly and religious sphere, that of action and reflection respectively². In what sense did people believe in God and the nature of his creation? Was the concept of God a powerful social construction, playing a similar role to that of our present adherence to democracy and its values in establishing a social cohesion?³ Was it a common myth providing a universally shared meaning? It is noteworthy that the division between Science and Religion, as it has played out since late Medieval times has exclusively concerned matters of ontology not of morals⁴ In particular the relationship between medieval thought and that of Antiquity is very interesting. The intellectual ties with the latter were never totally severed. Latin being the universal lingua franca testifies to the continuity, as did the ambitions, such as the Holy Roman Empire of mostly German lands, to reestablish the Roman empire, or at least to identify legitimate heirs. The growing fascination with Antiquity, especially the Greeks, took place over centuries, and cannot be pinpointed to a specific event⁵. At the same time a vibrant intellectual life took part in the Muslim world, but Arab thinkers have mostly been neglected until now, and Wedberg does not consider them part of the Western tradition, although admitting that they did play an important role in transmitting the hellenistic legacy⁶.

Copernicus is usually exhibited as the icon of modern science. Certainly he was not, and definitely he was not an empiricist. His ideas were due to speculation and erudition (although it would be impossible to prove that he was influenced by Greek thought on the matter, most likely he was not). And his immediate impact was negligible. The Church had

² This did not mean that the men of the Church did not interfere in the secular sphere, on the contrary, the Popes played a decisive role in politics, and their means may have even been considered divinely sanctioned if not necessarily divinely inspired.

³ It is notable the the idea people in general have of democracy is very vague. If forced to explain, the most common response would be to the effect that democracy is the will of the people, allowing everybody to make the decisions (note the definite article), ideas that were already dissected and rejected by Plato and Aristotle. Similarly the common view of the nature of God was correspondingly naive.

⁴ This does not mean that religion, or rather the Church, has not been criticized for its lack of morality. One need only think of Luther and his predecessors. But then criticism has been internal, more concerned with true interpretations than outright rejection.

⁵ A common suggestion of such a pivotal event is the fall of Constantinople to the infidel Turks in 1453, which meant a massive dispersion of hitherto unknown documents of Antiquity.

⁶ Certainly the Arabic intellectual influence has been unduly neglected and in the standard literature there are but tantalizing hints, no doubt reflecting nothing more profound than the ignorance of its authors. This is a subject one should think would be rife for revival at least on 'feministic' terms so to speak.

no objections, as long as his theories were considered as such, i.e. as useful mathematical devices for calculation, an attitude to which the Catholic church was true throughout the future process with Galilei. This points to interesting philosophical problems concerning the exact relationship between theory, as modeling reality, and reality itself. It is true that one may consider a heliocentric view as a simple technical device, a convenient choice of coordinate system in modern jargon; on the other hand the model as such poses further questions, such as the absence of parallax, a solutions to which would have been a universe far bigger than previously imagined⁷. The potentates of the Church were not stupid nor ignorant, they well knew the unpredictable consequences of opening Pandoras box.

The Copernican Revolution was brought about by Galilee. He was the one who openly made propaganda for the heliocentric point of view, and who had to suffer the consequences⁸. The invention of the telescope was the most decisive methodological invention in any science (and no science is more connected to an instrument than Astronomy is to the Telescope) and it certainly greatly extended the interest of astronomy as a subject of independent interest and made the question of heliocentricity impossible to circumvent. Galilei also laid the foundations of mechanics, thereby going beyond the achievements of the Greek and also articulating a powerfully philosophical view of how to do science, presented in the classical way of dialogues. The success of Galilei ensured the permanent rejection of scholasticism as hopelessly outmoded⁹ Galilei was succeeded by Newton, providing in many ways the pinnacle of science¹⁰.

Newtons theory wedded to a totally materialistic world view to the effect that everything is just a matter of configurations of particles leads to the conclusion of determinism. As Leibniz and later Laplace would elaborate on, the perfect knowledge of the situation at one given moment would enable to calculation of the indefinite past as well as the indefinite future. Thus a world view in complete harmony with that of Parmenides. Determinism remains a philosophical issue with devastating implications on morality and individual responsibility¹¹ and which it would be impossible for philosophers to get around. Many of the meta-physical systems which were developed (such as Spinoza) were deterministic. A philosophical challenge was to reconcile determinism with morality and the impression of a free will, which is one of the essences of consciousness, something conscious entities are

⁷ On the other hand the pre-socratics imagined an infinite universe. In fact an infinite universe is easier to imagine than a huge finite one, due to the erroneous conclusion that a finite universe need a boundary prompting the question of what lies beyond it. It is remarkable that geometry based on 'das Anschauliches' does presume the indefinite extension of lines. This ties up with the Kantian a priori view of space and Euclidean Geometry.

⁸ An even far more radical proponent was Bruno, who was also burned at the stake as an heretic. He was a daring philosopher proposing wildly speculative theories of multiple worlds. Yet, as this footnote confirms, remaining a footnote in history.

⁹ A disparaging point of view of the scholastic philosophers which may be intellectually unfair, according to Wedberg. On the other hand their efforts have been canonized by the Catholic church to this day, ensuring of course its own intellectual isolation.

¹⁰ Never before nor after has science brought about such deep ramifications by such simple principles, the only possible rival being the theory of natural selection by Darwin

¹¹ The same dilemma exists of course with the notion of an almighty God.

incapable of doubting.

Leibniz was a great man, a universalist of the kind which is impossible today. He was a path-breaking mathematician, although as such maybe a bit too formal¹², and a historian, diplomat, and a man of the world, yet the creator of one of the most bizarre meta-physical systems created ever, namely that of monads. Independent, self-sufficient entities, each one mirroring the whole universe, taking seriously the injunction that only that what is consciously perceived is endowed with existence. Bizarre, but yet on closer inspection, if not plausible at least seductively understandable. But it is not the meta-physics that interests Wedberg, once again it is the ambitions of a formal language, allowing an impartial calculation which will in the end settle all questions of controversy. To Leibniz we owe the concept of the best of all possible worlds, surely a sentiment worthy of ridicule, yet in many ways prophetic in its characterization say of Darwinian evolutions and all such theories based on feed-back and adaptation.

Of particular interest during this period are the three great British Empiricists - Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Locke is the pioneer. He reacts against the assumption of innate ideas by the rationalists, emphasizing the clean slate and the learning by experience. Being a pioneer, his ideas are developed into greater clarity by Hume, who can be said to represent the achievements of the empiricists. Berkeley is the fenomenalist, the material world not existing except as ideas in consciousness. The arguments are compelling if disturbing, and it was a crucial stage in the philosophical development of Moore and Russell to shake off the idealistic seduction. To Hume there was nothing but a bundle of perceptions, to make sense of them was something else. He is known for his critique of induction, pointing out that learning from experience is based on principles, such as induction and the regularity of the world, that we cannot learn from experience. We may have experience of the past, but none of the future. Also the time honored assumption of cause and effect comes under his scrutiny. In what sense does an event A cause B? Knowing from experience that B follows from A maybe nothing but a coincidence. All what we know ultimately rests on our immediate perceptions. Humes critique of induction implied that scientific truths are always provisional, induction cannot verify, as we never know what the future will have in store. He thereby anticipated Poppers falsifiability criterion. A synthesis between the critical empiricists and the rational tradition was effected by Kant the creator of what may have been the pinnacle of philosophy of the Enlightenment. Kant was indebted to Hume, who had waken him out of his dogmatic slumber. Kant makes a distinction between on one hand *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, on the other hand by analytic and synthetic. Analytic knowledge concerns the structure of sentences and are clearly concerned with our structure of thought, our reason. Syntethic knowledge concerns things outside language and thought involving the real content as opposed to the form. That analytic knowledge is *a priori* is of course what to expect, but can synthetic knowledge be *a priori* as well? What about mathematical knowledge? Synthetic or analytic? Kant assumes that they are synthetic (something that Frege and Russell would dispute.) Hume had rejected the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, but Kant felt that there ought to be in order to escape the radical skepticism of Hume, although he was unable to give any particular examples. Now the controversial aspect of Kants thought is that he believed

¹² cf. Arnolds assessment of him and Newton and other notable scientists of the 17th century

that analytic *a priori* was not really something which existed in the world as an object, but in us as subjects. Space and time did not exist apart as categories in which we ordered our impressions. Kants oft ridiculed notion that space had to be Euclidean, should be interpreted as our inability to conceive of any other, and thus imposing it on the world. Now the advent of non-Euclidean geometry a few decades after his death should have been quite interesting to him.

The Romantic period was the reaction to the Enlightenment. Science, rational reasoning, to be replaced by poetry and emotion. Sturm und Drang. In effect science and especially technology developed more rapidly than ever before (it was not until the 19th century that science did have a real impact on the life of people and society in general, and the rapidly developing technology also had a feedback on the pursuit of science as its instruments, if not necessarily its basic thinking, became refined and more sophisticated. But of course in the thin veneer of intellectual life the reaction had momentous consequences. Philosophy went into decline. Kant was succeeded by the likes of Schelling, Fichte and above all Hegel. According to Popper this constituted a catastrophe in the history of philosophy. Wedberg does not use such strong words, confining himself to remarking that there was a definite regression. Hegel had a profound influence throughout the century, his grand metaphysical theories being the fashion of the day, with few detractors (Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard being notable exceptions), in particular much is made of his influence on Marx, who bragged that he put Hegel upside down. In Marx a mechanical deterministic and material view of the world was combined with an idealistic and Hegelian notion of historical progress, in addition to being a moral revival of Christianity wedded to a political movement of Socialism. In the second edition, Wedberg feels compelled to add a section on Marx in view of his topicality during the seventies. Wedberg confines himself to a dry survey of the philosophical contents of Marxism, staying away from any political judgments. His verdict is rather grim, poor comfort may be had that Engels comes out even worse. July 2008