Remote Learning Module for 15 April 2020

Lecture Notes for Fernando Espinoza's *The Nature of Science*, Chapter 5

— Mediæval & Renaissance Thought —

*

Last time we concluded our tour through the ancient period, with a review of the major accomplishments of the Hellenistic Age, beginning with the Alexandrian Empire and stretching into the Roman Empire. Today we'll turn our attention to Mediæval and early Renaissance philosophy.

*   *   *

Here is a brief overview of the principle contrasts between the problems and concerns of the Ancient philosophers and the Mediæval/Renaissance thinkers.

Period	Schools of Thought	Themes & Projects	Crises
Ancient	Pre-Socratic Athenian Hellenistic & Roman	Naturalism Appearance/Reality Conjecture/Proof Foundations for Ethics	Incommensurables Abstracta/Concreta Justification Law/Ethics
Mediæval	Jewish Christian Islamic	Faith/Reason Supernaturalism Theory of Interpretation	Problem of Universals Church/State Proliferation Copernican Revolution

*   *   *

I. GENERAL CULTURAL BACKGROUND.

Let's first note the most general features of the two spirits of inquiry that came together as the ancient world tottered after the fall of Rome. From the ancient Greeks there came a spirit of intellectual investigation dominated by the idea that the natural world is best understood by the pursuit of rational analysis, and the problems of politics and ethics by seeking to free the human soul from disturbance by seeking harmony and proportion in our appetites and ambitions. From the three great Semitic religions there came a spirit of intellectual investigation dominated by the idea that the natural world is best understood by studying the revealed accounts in scripture, and following the divine commandments presented in those accounts.

	Cosmological Paradigm	Socio-Ethical Paradigm
Hellenic Spirit	REASON	PROPORTION
Jewish, Christian, Islamic Spirit	REVELATION	COVENANT

II. DETAILED EXPOSITION.

A. The appropriation of classical culture by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (3rd-10th Centuries) involved a massive rebuilding of culture after the fall of Rome, that is, with the decline of the ancient world, and the passing of the old religious and political orders. Two strands of culture thus flowered together: one from the Hellenic world and one from the new religious traditions practiced by the "peoples of the Book."

B. The tension between these two strands of culture, or spirits of inquiry, can be seen in the following examples.

From the Greek/Hellenic Spirit:

(**1**) In matters of cosmology and theoretical understanding generally, the dominant sensibility was *speculative*: inquiry should be guided by Reason. We find this sensibility in the early Christian thinker, Clement of Alexandria, for example:
** Inconsistent beliefs are dispensable: in conflicts among opinions, speculations, etc., one proceeds dialectically, building one's cosmology and ensuring its coherence along the way: A coherent view is the primary desideratum.

(**2**) In matters of legal, social, and practical understanding, the dominant spirit was to be found in the idea of *proportion* (as we find in theories of musical harmony); here we find the view that
** Justice and moral responsibility are essentially aesthetical notions: rightness is a matter of finding goodness of fit into an overall pattern.

From the Hebraic, Christian and Islamic Spirit:

(**1**) In matters of cosmology and theoretical understanding generally, the dominant understanding was *faith in revelation*: the tendency was to repudiate curiosity, so that reason and speculative inquiry were regarded as a tangled web—a snare that entices the irreligious. We find this sensibility in another early Christian thinker, Tertullian, famous for his dictum: *Credo quia ineptum* (literally: "I believe it because it is useless," by which he meant that faith in revelation needs no reason, no justification). We find this also in St. Augustine, who held in his enormously influential treatise, *The City of God*, that the primary purpose of philosophical work is the achievement of salvation from sin. Thus, for Augustine:
** Cosmology is not built, but *received*, and the prime desideratum is not order but hierarchy.

(**2**) In matters of legal, social, and practical understanding, the dominant understanding followed suit: the focal idea was not *Proportion*, but *Hierarchical Covenant*, which is to say, *Covenant*: justice, and moral responsibility are derived from a contract between the divine and the human; in other words:
** Rightness = the fulfillment of promise.

The Christian doctrine of the triune nature of God (the Trinity) provides a particularly interesting example of the tension between these two traditions. This doctrine can be traced to interpretations of scripture by the Greek Patristics (or Fathers of the Church), who wrote that the figure of Jesus was but one υποστασεις (hypostasis) of God, of which there are three revealed in the Gospels. This term, *hypostasis*, has a literal meaning of "standing under," and it was generally understood by thinkers given to the Hellenic, speculative tradition as meaning that the divine being encompasses three distinct substances, or essences, or agencies: Creative, Salvific, and Sustaining. When the Latin Fathers of the Church translated this Greek term, *hypostasis*, however, they chose the Latin word *persona*. This term originally meant a *mask* ("per-sona" referring to the sound-hole through which an actor wearing a mask would speak), but over the centuries, it came to mean an *actor* (from the figure of speech, metonymy, as we might find when referring to our Board of Trustees as "the suits"). Eventually, it came to mean a *leading actor*, and then, simply, a *leader*. By the time the Latin Fathers used *persona* to translate *hypostasis*, the word took on a legal meaning: a politician, or person of substance; so it made good sense to them that the three "substances" or "agencies" to which the Greek Fathers had been referring in their interpretations of scripture were the three *roles* played by God as ruler of the world.

III. GENERAL PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION.

A. The Problem of Knowledge

(**1**) Recall that for Plato the problem of knowledge is a central (if not *the* central problem) of philosophy, and he characterized this problem as that of distinguishing genuine knowledge (*episteme*) from true opinion (*doxa*). Plato was not, however, worried about how to distinguish knowledge from ignorance. Let's also recall Plato's Divided Line, where we have the divisions:

Epistemology	Ontology
Noetic Insight	The Eide
Conceptual Understanding	Ideas/Concepts
Beliefs	Particulars
Conjecture	Images

(2) As the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (204-270), and Augustine (345-430) filtered from Egypt into Europe in the Middle Ages, Plato's theory of knowledge ceased to be a solution to a problem. Knowledge was to be found in Revelation (though still opposed to true opinion, mere speculation); the problem disappears: Plotinus replaced Plato's *eide* (the forms) with the Absolute, or Ultimate Reality, so that the domain of discourse was restricted to the Physical World containing only Concepts, Particulars, and Images: the Absolute is beyond language and thought.

 (3) Primarily holding sway in theological discourse, we enter the Renaissance with the view that a devout and diligent mind will *receive* illumination directly from God: NO PROBLEM. There was no concern whatsoever to rescue knowledge from skepticism. As we'll see next time, when the likes of Galileo Galilei and René, Descartes, & Co. arrive on the scene at the beginning of modernity, a new problem arises—that of finding the proper method for justifying belief, i.e., overcoming the threat of skepticism: the worry that beliefs are not ultimately justifiable after all.

B. Metaphysics

 (1) Once the Aristotelian texts came into Europe from Alexandria via Moslem Spain, Aristotle's supremely integrated system came to dominate Mediæval imaginations in the 12th and 13th centuries.

(2) Recall that in Aristotle's, metaphysics—or *First Philosophy* (that is, "the science of being *qua* being," and which the Mediævals called the "queen of the sciences"—we find a fully general account of reality. The metaphysician, in giving this general account, utilizes two methods of defining the nature of things:

> (i) Substance and accidents (essential/variable qualities)
> (ii) The four causes (explanations) [all existing things have matter, form,
>   a causal history, and a finality].

(3) Especially Aristotle's account of finality or teleology (from Greek, *telos* or "end") came to play a central role in the metaphysical thinking of the later Middle Ages (Scholasticism), so that all of nature—physical and spiritual—was viewed teleologically. We can see this in two of the more salient doctrines of the Schoolmen (or Scholastics):

—According to Aristotle, the unmoved movers that account for planetary motion move by final causality; and bodies fall to achieve their *natural place*; and
—According to Christian ethics, conduct is good in this life just insofar as it leads to (and is drawn by) *Salvation*.

⊕ Ultimately: the whole of nature, from geography to geometry, our fallen natures to falling bodies was created by God *for* humankind: humans are the center of things, just as the Earth is the center of the cosmos, and Jerusalem is the center of the world. So too, it is with reference to human experience that everything is explained (Why does rain fall? To nourish crops).

(C) Theory of Perception

(1) Plato had held that our senses deceive us in that our perceptions copy or imitate the higher reality of the forms. Sensory ideas are removed from the world of forms. This notion went over into the Mediæval account of *Spiritual Knowledge*.

(2) Aristotle's theory of perception took over to account for *Physical Knowledge*:

→   The basic idea was that perception occurs by the mind
       appropriating the formal properties of things
       (the shape of your desk is appropriated; the matter is left
       behind).

→   This appropriation is the special power of a sense organ: the senses are
       just this power to transfer formal properties from objects to minds.

Note that on this account, the agency goes *from* the mind *to* nature: nature does not act on us, it is entirely passive.

(3) Consequently, it seemed obvious to Mediæval and early Renaissance thinkers that, given a healthy body, the real properties of things (shapes, colors, weights, odors, etc.) were exactly those properties perceived by the unaided senses.

*   *   *

— Addendum —

In the above brief tour of the Middle Ages, we met a few of the major Christian thinkers. Below, and for purposes of comparison, is a short introduction to the major thinkers in the Islamic tradition that followed quite similar lines.

Al-Kindi [800–870]: a Neoplatonist; he argued that emanation and creation *ex nihilo* are compatible; he held that the only reliable source of knowledge is "reason confirmed by revelation."

Al Farabi [875-930]: an Aristotelian; he held that prophets attain philosophical illumination and turn philosophical truth into myths in order to move people to live virtuous lives.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) [980-1037]: he claimed to have resolved the emanation/creation dilemma with an eternal world contingent for its existence on a necessary being (Allah).

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) [1126-1198]: known as The Commentator; he was the most committed Aristotelian of the lot; his most famous doctrine was the *Unity of the Intellect*, or the view that while as individuals we each act separately when performing acts of cognition (that is, when we're busy knowing stuff), the thinking process is identical in all rational beings.

*   *   *

Next time, we'll turn our attention to beginnings of modern philosophy as the Renaissance came to a close, and the tensions between Hellenic and Hebraic thought reached a point of crisis that so overwhelmed Western culture that new foundations for both natural and moral philosophy emerged in the wake of the Copernican Revolution and the Protestant Reformation. Be well everyone, and, although I imagine you are probably quite tired by now of my continuing to say so, do remember: social distancing continues to save lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently.