Lesson 2: A Glance at the Course of Philosophical Thought

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Scholastic Philosophy

After the spread of Christianity in Europe and the combination of the power of the Church with that of the Roman Empire, the centers of learning came under the influence of the apparatus of government to such an extent that by the sixth century (as was indicated previously) the universities and schools of Athens and Alexandria were closed.

This period, which lasted for about one thousand years, is called the middle Ages, and is characterized by the domination of the Church over the centers of learning and the programs of the schools and universities.

Among the prominent personalities of this era is St. Augustine, who tried to use philosophical principles, especially the views of Plato and the Neo-Platonists to explain the dogmas of Christianity. After him, a number of philosophical discussions were included in the programs of the schools.

However, the attitude toward Aristotelian thought was unfavorable for it was considered to be opposed to religious beliefs, and its teaching was prohibited. With the dominion of the Muslims in al-Andalus (Spain) and the penetration of Islamic thought in Western Europe, the ideas of Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) were more or less discussed, and the Christian scholars also became acquainted with Aristotelian views by means of the books of these philosophers.

Little by little members of the Church could not resist this wave of philosophical thought, and finally St. Thomas Aquinas accepted most of Aristotle's philosophical views which are reflected in his own books, and gradually, opposition to Aristotle's philosophy decreased, and even came to dominate some centers

of learning.

In any case, in the Middle Ages philosophy not only developed in Western lands, but also went through a course of decline, and contrary to the world of Islam, in which the sciences and learning continually flourished and became increasingly enriched, in Europe the only discussions taught in the Church affiliated schools, and which came to be called scholastic philosophy, were those which could justify the dogmas of Christianity, dogmas which were not without deviation themselves.

It goes without saying that such philosophy could have no destiny but death and extinction.
In scholastic philosophy, besides logic, theology, ethics, politics, and some natural philosophy and astronomy which were accepted by the Church, grammar and rhetoric were also incorporated into the curricula, and in this way, the philosophy of this period was considered more broadly [than at present].

The Renaissance and the Comprehensive Change in Thinking

From the fourteenth century the ground was being prepared for a comprehensive change by means of various factors. One factor was the flourishing of nominalism (the fundamentality of naming) and the denial of the existence of universals in England and France.

This philosophical tendency played an effective role in undermining the foundations of philosophy. Another factor was that the natural philosophy of Aristotle became a matter of controversy at the University of Paris.

Another factor was the murmurings of the incompatibility of philosophy with Christian dogma, and in other words, the incompatibility of reason and religion. Another factor was the manifestation of disagreements between the temporal rulers and the authorities of the Church,
and among the Christian authorities themselves there were also disputes which led to the emergence of Protestantism.

Yet another factor was the cresting of humanism and the tendency to deal with the problems of human life while disregarding metaphysical problems. Finally, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the Byzantine Empire collapsed, and a complete change (political, philosophical, literary and religious) appeared throughout Europe, and the institutions of the papacy were attacked from every side. In this course, the weak scholastic philosophy reached its final destiny.

In the sixteenth century, interest in the natural and empirical sciences became intense, and the discoveries of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo shook the foundations of Ptolemaic astronomy and Aristotelian natural philosophy. In a word, in Europe all aspects of human affairs were subjected to disturbance and instability.

The papal institutions were able to withstand these roaring waves for quite some time, and scientists were brought before the inquisition with the excuse of their opposition to religious dogmas, that is, for

their views on natural philosophy and cosmology which were accepted by the Church for the exegesis of the Bible and religious doctrines. Many were burnt in the fires of blind fanaticism and selfishness of the authorities of the Church. However, eventually the Church and papal institution were forced to withdraw in shame.

The ruthless fanatical behavior of the Catholic Church had no effect but to give the people a negative attitude toward the authorities of the Church, and in general toward religion, and likewise the downfall of scholastic philosophy, that is, the only current philosophy of that period, brought about an intellectual and philosophical vacuum, and finally the appearance of modern skepticism.

During this process, the only thing that made progress was humanism, and a desire for natural and empirical science in the cultural arena, and a tendency toward liberalism and democracy in the field of politics.

The Second Phase of Skepticism

For centuries, the Church had spread the views and ideas of some philosophers as religious beliefs, and Christians had accepted them as certain and sacred, including Aristotelian and Ptolemaic views of cosmology which were upset by Copernicus, and other unbiased scholars also realized their invalidity. We have already mentioned that the dogmatic resistance of the Church and the ruthless behavior of the authorities of the Church with respect to the scientists brought about adverse reaction.

This change in thoughts and beliefs and the toppling of the intellectual and philosophical foundations [of the Middle Ages] brought about a psychological crises in many of the scholars, and raised doubts in their minds such as: how can we be sure that other beliefs we hold are not invalid, and that one day their invalidity will not become evident? How can we know that newly discovered scientific theories will not also be invalidated someday?

Finally, a great scholar named Montaigne denied the value of science and knowledge and he explicitly wrote, how can we be sure that the theory of Copernicus will not be invalidated in the future? He once more expressed the doubts of the skeptics and sophists in a new way, and defended skepticism, and thus another phase of skepticism appeared.

The Peril of Skepticism

The attitude of doubt, in addition to being a painful psychological plague, also involves great spiritual and material perils for society. With the denial of the value of knowledge, there can be no hope for the advancement of the sciences and learning, likewise no room remains for moral values and their magnificent role in human life, as religion also loses its intellectual basis.

Rather, the greatest blows are directed toward religious dogmas, beliefs unrelated to material and

sensible affairs. When the flood of doubt flows through the hearts of the people, naturally, the beliefs about the super natural are the most vulnerable. Therefore, skepticism is an extremely dangerous plague that threatens all aspects of human life with destruction, and with its spread no ethical, legal, political or religious system can remain stable, and it provides an excuse for all sorts of crimes, injustice and oppression.

For this very reason, the struggle against skepticism is a duty of all scholars and philosophers, and it is also a responsibility for religious leaders, and it is also a matter about which counselors, politicians and social reformers must be diligent.

In the seventeenth century various activities were undertaken to shore up the ruins of the Renaissance, including struggle against the perils of skepticism. The Church tended to cut off the dependence of Christianity on reason and science, and fortified religious doctrines through the heart and faith. However, philosophers and scholars sought a firm and unshakable basis for knowledge and value, so that intellectual fluctuations and social upheavals would not destroy them.

Modern Philosophy

The most important effort of this period for salvation from skepticism and the revitalization of philosophy was that of Rene Descartes, the French philosopher who is called “the father of modern philosophy”.

After much research and meditation, he devised a plan by which to bolster the footings of philosophical thought; his principle may be summarized in his famous proposition: “I doubt, therefore I am,” or “I think, therefore I am”, that is, if one follows the way of doubt regarding the existence of everything, one will nonetheless never be able to doubt one’s own existence.

Since doubt is meaningless without one who doubts, the human existence of doubters and thinkers is also indubitable. Then he tried to formulate specific laws of thought similar to mathematical laws and to solve the problems of philosophy on their basis.

In that period of intellectual tumult, the thought and views of Descartes were a source of reassurance for many scholars; and other great thinkers, such as Leibniz, Spinoza and Malebranch, also sought to reinforce the groundwork of modern philosophy. Nevertheless, these efforts were unable to bring about a harmonious philosophical system having certain and consolidated foundations.

On the other hand, the attention of the majority of scholars had turned toward the empirical sciences, many of whom displayed no interest in research in philosophical and metaphysical problems.

Because of this, a strong, firm and well-supported philosophical system did not come into existence in Europe, and although collections of philosophical views and ideas occasionally were proposed in the form of specific schools of philosophical thought which within certain limits were able to win more or less of a following, still none of them was able to become permanently established, as remains the case.

The Fundamentality of Experience and Modern Skepticism

While rational philosophy was being revived on the continent of Europe, and reason was about to find its own place in the understanding of truth, another tendency was making progress in England, which was based on the fundamentality of sense and experience, called empiricism.

The beginnings of this tendency go back to the end of the Middle Ages and to William of Ockham, an English philosopher who was a proponent of the fundamentality of naming, and was also actually a denier of the fundamentality of reason.

In the sixteenth century, Francis Bacon, and in the seventeenth century, Hobbes, who were also English, both relied upon the fundamentality of sense and experience, but those who are known as empiricists are another three English philosophers: John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume, who discussed the problems of knowledge from the end of the seventeenth century until about one century later, and while criticizing the views of Descartes regarding “innate knowledge”, they considered the source of all knowledge to be sense and experience.

Among them, John Locke was the most moderate and nearest to the rationalists. Berkeley was an avowed proponent of the fundamentality of naming, i.e., a nominalist, but (perhaps unconsciously) he resorted to the principle of causation, which is a rational principle, and likewise he had other views that were incompatible with the fundamentality of sense and experience.

But Hume remained completely loyal to the fundamentality of sense and experience, and to its implications and he bound himself to skepticism regarding the metaphysical, and to an acceptance of the reality of natural phenomena. In this way, the third phase of skepticism in the history of Western philosophy took shape.

Kant’s Critical Philosophy

Hume’s thoughts are among those which formed the groundwork for the philosophical ideas of Kant, and in his own words, “It is Hume who awakened me from my dogmatic slumber,” and Kant especially found agreeable Hume’s explanation of the principle of causality, which was based on the idea that experience cannot establish a necessary relation between cause and effect.

For many long years Kant thought about the problems of philosophy, and wrote many essays and books. He offered a specific philosophical view which in comparison to similar sorts of views was more durable and acceptable. But he finally arrived at the conclusion that theoretical reason does not have the ability to solve the problems of metaphysics and that the rational principles in this field lack scientific value.

He explicitly declared that problems such as the existence of God, the eternity of the soul and free will could not be established by rational proofs, but that belief and faith in them is implied by the acceptance

of an ethical system, in other words, it is an accepted principle of the precepts of practical reason, and that it is ethics which calls us to faith in the resurrection, not the reverse.

For this reason, Kant must be considered as a reviver of ethical values, which after the Renaissance were subject to instability and were in danger of fading and being obliterated. On the other hand, he must be considered to be one of the destroyers of the foundations of metaphysical philosophy.
