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Author(s): Paul Oskar Kristeller

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

FICINO AND POMPONAZZI ON THE PLACE OF MAN IN THE UNIVERSE

BY PAUL OSKAR KRISTELLER

In attempting to understand a given body of ideas, the student of intellectual history will not only seek to determine its truth or its philosophical and historical significance; he will also inquire how far these ideas were old or novel at the time a writer first expressed them. To be sure, the history of thought has shifted back and forth between an emphasis on originality and an adherence to permanent principles, and the emphasis prevailing at a given period has often guided the efforts of authors. Yet neither extreme has ever at any time been realized. What we actually find everywhere is a mixture of old and new elements, in varying proportions to be sure.

There are several reasons for the acceptance and repetition of old ideas. One factor is certainly the intellectual inertia which leads a man to receive without question what he has been taught, or to reject without proper examination other proposed ideas which would conflict with his familiar views. More important, in the case of a moderately independent mind, is the impossibility of any individual's constructing a new system of the universe from the ground up without the use of borrowed materials. This fact makes clear the importance of investigating the sources and background of a philosopher, provided we do not stop with noting that certain ideas have been taken from certain sources, but proceed to inquire why they have been borrowed and how they have been transformed to become part of the new synthesis. Another factor which definitely makes for continuity, though this may sound like a paradox, is polemic and discussion. The current views against which a thinker reacts mark also the starting-point for his own thought, determine the range and direction of his ideas, and often constitute the necessary complement to his own system. This is one of the reasons why pupils seldom succeed in maintaining intact the system of their masters. Ideas lose their force when the conditions in opposition to which they were conceived disappear, just as a man leaning with all his force against a wall will collapse when the wall is suddenly taken away. Moreover, every philosophical thought is a response to a common world. There are certain basic facts which no thinker can disregard, and certain enduring problems which give continuity to their varying solutions. Finally, certain problems admit of only a limited number of basic solutions, which recur more or less regularly in the history of ideas, though the details may vary. This accounts for the fact that there are a few persistent trends which may be traced through the entire history of thought.

On the other hand, there are no less powerful factors contributing to a continual change and variety of ideas. Most thinkers derive some degree of novelty from their own personal outlook, or even from a conscious endeavor to be original or "up-to-date." Favorable circumstances may help them to reach conclusions for which the premises have been prepared by their predecessors. Intellectual, political, or social conditions prevailing at the time may force them to modify ideas they would prefer to restate, which were conceived under different circumstances. More important is the basic fact that each individual and each age starts life anew, has a new approach to truth, and may hence make a specifically new contribution to the realm of ideas. Even in the extreme case in which a thinker is merely copying or summarizing the work of previous writers, his selection and emphasis will depend on his preferences, if not on specific ideas. In view of this necessary combination of old and new elements, the history of ideas will often appear like the variations on a musical theme.

This point of view is particularly helpful in understanding the history of a specific trend or tradition which may be traced over a longer period, such as Platonism or Aristotelianism. Such a tradition is held together by a common orientation toward a great thinker of the past and toward some of his basic ideas. But it is by no means a succession of simple repetitions of theories established once and for all at the beginning. Otherwise it would have no interest whatsoever. What actually takes place is a process of continual adaptation, in which the basic ideas are gradually transformed and readjusted to the ever-changing historical and intellectual situation and to the specific interests and problems of individual thinkers. A later thinker who tries to interpret or to restate the ideas of an earlier thinker will always translate old concepts into new terms and will reconstruct the old system according to his own views. He will select and emphasize some elements of the previous tradition and omit or disregard others. He will also combine them with ideas borrowed from outside sources or added by himself.

It is obvious that the historian of philosophy must adjust his method to this state of affairs. For a long time the entire study of past philosophies had been limited to stating and criticizing "opinions," and this still remains the necessary basis or the final goal of any interpretation. But more recently the history of philosophy has come to be a special discipline aiming at a philosophical understanding of past thinkers through the resources of historical and philological scholarship. In pursuing this task, some students have been inclined to treat the great thinkers as isolated figures and to emphasize only the novel and original aspects of their thought. Others, on the contrary, have been more interested in the continuing tradition of certain ideas and tendencies, and have emphasized the permanent and recurring factors at the expense of the changing and varying details. I should think that a combination of both methods is needed. The historian

should recognize the recurring basic ideas and attitudes in their various appearances, but he should also describe and explain what is specific in the different appearances and its relation to the basic principles. The method should be flexible, of course, according to the number and significance of the novel elements found in each representative of a given tradition. In this way the historian of philosophy will do justice to the fact that an intellectual tradition consists in the varying manifestations of permanent, basic principles.

When we apply this method to the history of Platonism or Aristotelianism, we are confronted with the additional difficulty that Platonism and Aristotelianism are, so to speak, complementary to each other. Closely related from the beginning, their very relation has been subject to a continually changing interpretation. The reason is to be found in the relation between Plato and Aristotle themselves. Modern historical research has led to the conclusion that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were not simply two opposite or merely different systems of thought, but rather stages in a gradual development which led from the mature works of Plato through the dialogues of his old age and through the early works of Aristotle (as reconstructed out of preserved fragments) to the treatises of Aristotle's mature period. But this historical insight cannot prevent us from recognizing that there really is a basic difference between the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

This ambiguous relation has determined the history of Platonism and Aristotelianism ever since. There were periods in which the contrast between the two traditions was strongly emphasized, but even then the followers of Plato could not help borrowing problems and concepts of Aristotelian origin, nor could the Aristotelians eliminate the Platonic elements contained in the system of their master. At other times a so-called eclectic tendency held that Plato and Aristotle "disagreed in words, but agreed in their doctrines"; but the disagreement in words still remained quite puzzling for the interpreters, and they were obliged in their attempted synthesis to subordinate the views of one master to those of the other. Thus the two currents represent two different poles of philosophical orientation, without being entirely exclusive of each other. On the contrary, we might say that each belongs to the history of the other, and that just in those times when one of the two traditions definitely prevails over the other, it is also bound to continue and to represent the heritage of that other tradition.

In medieval Europe, Platonism as modified by Augustine was the prevailing trend in philosophy and theology up to the twelfth century, and remained an important secondary current long thereafter. Aristotelianism on the other hand became predominant in the thirteenth century, and retained much of its hold up to the sixteenth century and even afterwards. Yet from the fifteenth century on both Platonism and Aristotelianism

entered a novel phase under the influence of the new humanistic movement. Both currents, to be sure, continued the preceding traditions of the Middle Ages, but at the same time they formulated the traditional problems and doctrines in novel terms and thus represent new stages in the history of those traditions. Let us consider each of them in one of their chief representatives, that is, in Ficino and in Pomponazzi.

Ficino's main work, the *Theologia Platonica*, is an attempt to prove the immortality of the soul by rational arguments. The problem of immortality acquires this importance for him for the following reasons. Ficino argues that we are taught by a basic experience that contemplation of the invisible and of God is the major activity of human life and constitutes the very goal of our existence. But at the same time we find that in our present life this goal is attained only in an imperfect fashion, that is, by very few persons, and by them only for a brief time. Hence we must assume that there will be a future life in which the highest aim of our existence, the immediate knowledge and enjoyment of God, will be attained by a large number of human beings and in a permanent fashion. The immortality of the soul thus appears as a necessary postulate for maintaining that contemplation is the goal of human life.¹

Pomponazzi also dedicates one of his most important works to the problem of immortality, but his solution is just the opposite from Ficino's. There are no rational proofs for the immortality of the soul; and since the doctrine of immortality must be upheld as a religious truth, it can be based only on the authority of the Bible and of the Church, but not on philosophical arguments. This denial of immortality, at least in the sphere of reason, is based on a characteristic premise which again is just the opposite of Ficino's emphasis on contemplation. The human intellect always depends on corporeal, empirical objects, and there is no reason to assume any higher activity of the human mind which would bring it into contact with purely intelligible entities. But Pomponazzi is no materialist. Although the intellect is corporeal with regard to its objects, as a subject of thought it is immaterial, and in this sense it may be said that the human soul, though mortal in its essence, does at least participate in immortality. Pomponazzi thus replaces the concept of immortality as a perfect life after death with that of a participation in immortality during the present life. The meaning of this change becomes apparent in his conception of virtue. Whereas Ficino still accepted the conventional opinion that immortality is a moral postulate in order that virtue and vice may be properly rewarded after death, Pomponazzi emphatically denies the moral value of such recompense. The essential reward of virtue is virtue itself, the essential punishment of vice, vice itself. Thus moral doctrine is freed of all metaphysical premises, and at the same time the goal of human existence is conceived as something

¹ See: P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (New York, 1943).

attainable during our present life, and not to be expected in another, future life.²

Ficino and Pomponazzi thus represent two philosophical attitudes basically different from, if not opposed to each other, which may be roughly identified with the general trend of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions respectively. It is hence all the more significant that in spite of this contrast they have something in common which seems to be characteristic of Renaissance thought. The very fact that such basic importance is attached to the problem of immortality shows a predominant interest in man and his metaphysical position, not nearly so marked in the previous period.³ Moreover, the contrasting ideas of future contemplation and of self-contained virtuous conduct are but alternative solutions to the same basic problem, that is, to the question: what is the ultimate aim of human life? Finally, in the passages we have selected in order to illustrate Ficino's and Pomponazzi's doctrine of the place of man in the universe, both of them make very similar statements, emphasizing that man is the center of the universe and is related to all other parts of the world. Even if Pomponazzi borrowed the idea from Ficino, the fact that these statements are found in entirely different and even opposed contexts makes the coincidence all the more interesting. The passages acquire additional significance from their similarity to Pico's famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.⁴

It would be entirely wrong to claim that the glorification of man was a new discovery of the Renaissance. The praise of man because of his invention of the arts is quite familiar in Greek literature and thought, and so is the simile of man as microcosm. The intermediate position of the soul between the corporeal and the intelligible world is definitely suggested by Plato and further developed by the Neoplatonists and Hermetics. On the other hand, the superiority of man over other creatures is definitely indicated in *Genesis* and in several other passages of the Old Testament. Early Christian emphasis on the salvation of mankind and on the incarnation of Christ implied a conception of the dignity of man which was further developed by some of the Church Fathers, Lactantius and Augustine for example.⁵

These ideas were never entirely forgotten during the Middle Ages. But I am under the impression that since the beginning of Renaissance humanism the emphasis on man becomes more persistent, more systematic, and

² Petrus Pomponatius, *Tractatus De Immortalitate Animae*, translated by William Henry Hay II (Haverford, 1938).

³ G. Gentile, *Il concetto dell'uomo nel Rinascimento*, in *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento* (Florence, 1940).

⁴ "Of the Dignity of Man," translated by Elizabeth L. Forbes, this *Journal* III (1942), 347-54; E. Cassirer, *ibid.*, 123-44; 319-46.

⁵ G. Garin, "La 'dignitas hominis' e la letteratura patristica," *Rinascita*, I, no. 4 (1938), 102-46.

more exclusive. Petrarch, who in his unsystematic way often expresses ideas which were to be elaborated in the succeeding period, insists that nothing is admirable but the soul, and that there is only one important subject of human thought, man himself.⁶ Before the middle of the fifteenth century Giannozzo Manetti, the Florentine humanist, composed a treatise *On the Excellency and Dignity of Man* as a counterpart to Innocent III's work *On the Misery of Man*.⁷ With Ficino the glorification of man assumes a more definite philosophical significance. He emphasizes mainly two aspects: man's universality and his central position. Man's universality is reflected in his relation to all parts of the universe and in his unlimited aspirations. His position in the center of the universe, moreover, gives man an importance unrivaled by any other being except God himself. Pico, obviously following Ficino, modifies his theory on one characteristic point. Man is no longer the center of the universe, but he is detached from the entire series of existing things and free to choose his own form of life. Thus the dignity of man is no longer conceived in terms of his universality, but in terms of his liberty.⁸ These ideas of Ficino and Pico exercised a wide influence in the later Renaissance. A good example of this influence is Vives' *Fable on Man*, based entirely on Pico's conception.⁹

The passages from Ficino about the universal rule of man over the elements seem also to have something in common with the Baconian program of the dominion of man over nature. His conclusion that man is endowed with an almost god-like mind because Archimedes was able to construct a model of the heavenly sphere, may even suggest Galileo's assertion that God's knowledge of mathematics is different in quantity but not in kind from our own mathematical knowledge.¹⁰ Of course in the latter two cases no direct influence is likely, and the emphasis and context are entirely different; but the comparison may help to clarify some implications on both sides.

The position of man in the universe has a bearing not only on man, but also on the universe. Hence the statements of Ficino, Pico, and Pomponazzi have a definite significance not only in the history of the conception of man, but also in the history of cosmology. The medieval conception of the universe was dominated by the idea of a hierarchy of substances, which goes

⁶ Francesco Petrarca, *Le familiari*, bk. IV, no. 1 (ed. V. Rossi, v. I [Florence, 1933], 159). *Id.*, *Le traité De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, ed. L. M. Capelli (Paris, 1906), 24 f.

⁷ See Gentile, *op. cit.*, 90 ff.

⁸ See Kristeller, *op. cit.*, 117 ff., 407 ff.

⁹ Joannes Ludovicus Vives, *Fabula de homine*, in *Opera Omnia*, IV (Valencia 1783), 3-8.

¹⁰ Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo, giornata prima* (*Edizione Nazionale*, VII [Florence, 1897], 128 f.).

back to Neoplatonic sources. Whereas in the field of biology this idea of hierarchy survived up to fairly recent times, in the field of cosmology it was definitely abandoned by early modern science. In the astronomy of Kepler and Galileo there is no room for differences of rank and perfection between heaven and earth, or between the various stars or the various elements. But even before the new astronomy was definitely established a gradual disintegration of the old idea of hierarchy took place, most definitely in Nicholas of Cusa and later in Giordano Bruno.

It would seem that the conceptions of Ficino and Pico played their more modest part in this disintegration. To be sure, Ficino takes a hierarchy of five principles as the very starting-point of his metaphysical system. But he immediately asks how the various levels of that hierarchy are related to each other; and he seeks a central link which through its attributes could mediate between the opposite extremes of the universe, and through its manifold aspirations and movements could transmit forces and qualities from one end of the universe to the other. This question actually transcends the limits of the traditional notion of hierarchy, and implies a dynamic conception of the universe such as was developed by the natural philosophers of the sixteenth century. Whereas on this point Pomponazzi merely follows Ficino, Pico goes one step farther. He also maintains the notion of a hierarchy; but for him man is no longer a definite element in the hierarchial series, not even its privileged center: he is entirely detached from the hierarchy and can move upward and downward according to his free will. Thus the hierarchy is no longer all-inclusive, while man, because of his possession of freedom, seems to be set entirely apart from the order of objective reality.

The last observation points to a more general characteristic of Renaissance thought: it is a period of transition, in a specific sense which does not apply to most other periods of thought. To be sure there are always varieties of opinion and orientation. But the philosophies of the thirteenth or of the seventeenth century were based on common principles. Renaissance thought has common problems and common aspirations, but no common principles or solutions. The disintegration of old principles that appears during the Renaissance has not only a negative value in clearing the way for the formulation of new principles that was bound to come. It has also a positive significance, because it is generated by new forms of experience and new problems which were destined to be absorbed in the succeeding synthesis of the seventeenth century.

Columbia University.