

Models of Argumentation in Eighteen Century Cambridge Platonism (the Case of Ralph Cudworth)

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Abstract – *The paper focuses on the influence of some argumentation models upon the development of the epistemological concepts of Ralph Cudworth, an XVII-th century Cambridge Platonist.*

Key words – models of argumentation, Cambridge Platonism, Ralph Cudworth, the nature of knowledge, philosophia perennis.

I. Introduction

As a historical and philosophical phenomenon Cambridge Platonism is placed between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Although the seventeenth century is a period of Early Modern Philosophy, Cambridge (Neo)Platonists cannot be called neither empiricists nor rationalists.

What distinguished Cambridge Platonism from the other schools of Modern Philosophy was their specific view of the central philosophical problems and the arguments they used for the assertion of their own position.

For example, let us take the works of one of the main representatives of Cambridge Platonism — Ralph Cudworth. In his key work «*The True Intellectual System of the Universe*» he made an attempt to harmonically combine modern science and centuries-old experience of Christian philosophy, which he authoritatively interpreted through the traditional concepts of Platonism and Neoplatonism.

The true value of the philosophical heritage of Ralph Cudworth was appreciated only in the twentieth century. Cudworth is said to be "the real founder of British Idealism," [1] "the only philosopher of the Cambridge group" [2] and "the most tough-minded and lucid among the Cambridge Platonists." [3].

II. Key elements of Cudworth's argumentation

In short, the philosopher shares neither the views of modern philosophers that the truth must be sought only in the present or the future, nor their belief in the possibility of progress in philosophy. Cudworth defended the continuity of the tradition. As a true Platonist he believed in the existence of *philosophia perennis* or eternal philosophy which has always been maintained in its fundamental traits.

To achieve its goal, Cudworth offers the following model of argumentation: to do a critical analysis of all the ancient philosophy and choose not only the most suitable in terms of eternal and true one, but also so discard

unnecessary and harmful, leading to its degradation and neglect. Using this strategy, Cudworth not only shows the continuity of the philosophical tradition, but also criticizes two main enemies of religious thought of the XVII century — atheism and materialism. For instance, when he writes about the nature of knowledge and the way in which the mind gains the ability of knowledge, he refers not to the direct analysis of the contents of consciousness, as did Locke or Hume, but allows himself to formulate certain metaphysical prejudices, which main objective is to prove the relation between the divine and the human mind.

Key elements of Cudworth's argumentation:

1. The reference to the authority of the Bible.
2. The authority of ancient philosophers, in particular — Plato and Plotinus.

Obviously, the philosopher relies on his own logical presuppositions, but he is certain that those two elements are enough to build a foundation for everything else.

There is no surprise that he uses the Bible as an authority. For Cudworth, the Bible embodies all the fullness of Christian philosophy. So there is no need in other sources — that is why he completely ignores the works of both the Church fathers and the medieval thinkers. Secondly, authority of the Bible is commensurate to authority of ancient philosophers. There is found in Cudworth's works this specific feature of Renaissance philosophical thought when he refers to Plato who is as authoritative as the Scriptures themselves.

III. Epistemological Conception of Ralph Cudworth

We assume, in such a model there are certain explicit flaws. Primarily, a forced selectivity of sources. Especially of those that represent the opposite viewpoints. Cudworth selects only those fragments in the writings of Plato, Plotinus and Iamblichus that reinforce his own position, and carefully avoids places that could cause him trouble.

The way in which Cudworth uses his arguments clearly indicates on his vision of the nature of knowledge. The latter, in his opinion, is basically impossible unless there is something eternal that would provide the preconditions for existence of all things. The philosopher believes that the world is eternal, and it provides the immutability of truth and indicates a continuity of knowledge. These considerations lead him to the conclusion of the continuity of philosophical tradition, pointing out that the possibility of human knowledge itself could be caused only by one antecedent — the existence of God [4].

It is true that while reading Cudworth it becomes immediately evident that the intention of his philosophy is primarily theological. In fact, he believed that "philosophy should have a religious foundation." [5] From such passages of Cudworth as "there is a scale of being, with God at the head and at the foot in animate matter [4] or "the divine will and omnipotence itself hath no imperium upon the divine understanding: for if God understood only by will, he would not understand at all" [4] we can easily predict what kind of epistemology is to

be expected from the author. Passmore seems to have aptly remarked about traditional theories of knowledge saying that they do not arise out of a direct examination of the content of consciousness but rather appear as a consequence of metaphysical presuppositions [6].

In Cudworth's philosophy there are two kinds of such presuppositions. The first one says that there is a natural distinction between good and evil. It does not depend upon human or divine legislation but rather inherent in the realm of being itself. The second presupposition underlines that since there is a fundamental gap between reality and appearance there must be a crucial difference between man's cognitive faculties. Because Cudworth's epistemological argument is chiefly used to introduce an ontology [7] some of its specific features need to be reminded more precisely.

Cudworth pays a great deal of attention to differentiating the nature of reason and that of sensation. The intention of establishing this basic difference is to demonstrate that sensation can not be knowledge and thus to prove the essential ontological difference between these two kinds of cognition. According to Cudworth, in real knowledge knower and known must be identical, whereas in sensation the senser and the sensed are always quite distinct. Consequently, he asserts that perception also must be sharply distinguished from knowledge, since knowledge is of propositions, and perception is knowledge of isolated sensation. So Cudworth concludes that both perception and knowledge are two distinct processes, and thus knowledge is regarded only as self-knowledge.

On these grounds, Cudworth stresses the connection between his theory of knowledge and that proposed by Plato in his *Theaetetus*. As we remember, in this dialogue Socrates is presented as supporting the argument that real knowledge starts with the analyses of judgements, not of sensations, and the former necessarily involve relations. Since the relations are never perceived by senses, knowledge and perception can not be identical. Cudworth takes this doctrine as his point of departure and attempts to develop a detailed theory of the ideas and forms of their relationships. It is true that his list of concepts is more extensive than that elaborated by Socrates. However, it can not be said that Cudworth gives us any careful deduction or exact classification of the concepts. He only suggests three classes into which ideas may be divided, namely, ideas regarding the nature of thinking beings, and here Cudworth includes all ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness; ideas considering the ultimate reality of corporeal beings; and, finally, ideas of relationships among corporeal beings.

Characteristically, it is this fact of kinship between human and divine knowledge that Cudworth constantly emphasises. For his participation in the divine knowledge means that, while there is a vast difference in degree between man's knowledge and that of God, man's knowledge is like His in kind. Briefly, in a world of a constant change where sensations can not be a reliable

source of knowledge there is still possible a clearness of the ideas in man's thinking. These are true and valid source of knowledge because they are "contained in some one active and vital principle." [8] Arguing for all these principles Cudworth is quite certain that he has found the firm ground standing on which he can move the world.

This "one active and vital principle" Cudworth often makes reference to which he is certain lies at the bottom of all the intelligible world is nothing else but God. Cudworth depicts Him as "...the first original Knowledge or Mind, from whence all other knowledge and minds are derived, being that of a nabsolutely perfect and omnipotent Being, comprehending... the ideas of all possible things, that may be produced by it, together with their relations to one another, and their necessary and immutable truths." So he is convinced that the very nature of man's knowledge and understanding "proves the existence of God." [8].

Conclusion

Thus, we can easily distinguish the following features of Ralph Cudworth's argumentation: a) equivalent authority of the Bible and the ancient philosophers; b) appeal to the necessary existence of the divine and eternal as a precondition of existence of entity and possibility to cognize it; and c) selective attitude to the sources from which the thinker chooses those which better demonstrate the need in the existence of God and his role in this world and bring continuity to the philosophical tradition.

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