

A possible Trans-Rationalist Tradition in Philosophy Some Notes - Heward Wilkinson

I would consider myself a Rationalist, I aspire, like **Hegel** and his followers, at any rate to making the universe intelligible, and cannot imagine how a universe which is not intelligible can be an object of reference and description; when meaning is denied, it can only be denied in terms of another meaning. I am, however, much influenced by a kind of Counter-Tradition, as one book in process of publication has it, which draws at the least from a kind of intuition if not a complete repudiation of rationalism, in this sense. I say 'a kind of', because I do not think philosophers simply fall into one category or the other; most philosophers and philosophical anthropologists of various kinds embody both impulses.

In the talk, I'll:

1. sketch the 'counter-tradition' by racing illustratively through major figures to evoke the tensions of their thought.
2. then I shall illustrate more specifically from one very interesting line of influence, from **John Henry Newman** to the later **Wittgenstein**. This will connect also with **Newman's** understanding and use of Aristotle's concept of φρόνησις - *phronēsis*. What is striking is that whereas Greek philosophy applied *phronesis* mainly in the context of ethical issues and relationship actions, **Newman**, and, by implication following him, the **Wittgenstein** of *On Certainty* apply it to knowledge as well (**Newman** nicknames it 'the Illative Sense' in *A Grammar of Assent*), which is then, more or less radically, construed as *action*. It is then not difficult to see that the epistemological passages from the **Nietzsche** collection published as *The Will to Power* take and invoke a similar position. Here, then, the tradition deriving from **Kant** via **Schopenhauer**, and also via **Nietzsche**, then influencing writers like **Freud**, **Jung**, **Joyce**, **Wittgenstein**, **Proust**, **Mann**, **DH Lawrence**, **TS Eliot**, and then **FR Leavis**, takes on the force of a kind of counter-culture and overlaps with post-modernism. Once one sees that, one looks back and sees this element was there from the beginning. A 'commonsense' trans-rationalism runs parallel in the British tradition, from **Moore's** appeal to certainties which we know but cannot prove beyond ostension based on circular assumption, as for instance to my having two hands, to **Austin's** 'commonsense voluntarism', and **Strawson's** 'commonsense Kantianism'. We'll discuss Newman's examples, such as his claim that, in the nineteenth century, we both do rationally know, yet could not in any simple sense prove, that Britain is an island. As **Daniele Moyal-Sharrock** argues, **Wittgenstein** in *On Certainty* radicalises this type of argument in two ways: *one*: he incorporates the philosophical scepticism examples which, since **Hume**, have encompassed all of our sense knowledge whatever; *two*: he argues that this is not knowledge but *certain belief enacted in action*, and is both beneath and beyond justification.

1. Here now in this note I simply sketch the first part: **Instances of the counter-tradition in aspects of major figures - and the elements opposing it.**

Herakleitos - his appeal to the uneliminable and indeterminable flux of things is balanced, as in Anaximander, by the logos of causal and dialectical lawfulness that runs through all process.

Pamenides' comprehensive rationalism is balanced by his and Zeno's origination of the dialectical questioning of the intelligibility of ordinary experience which runs right down through **Hegel** and **Bradley** et al to post-modernism (**Derrida** on *Differance* for instance)

Plato appears to be a rationalist, but yet takes for granted **Parmenides'** critique, and, ultimately, appeals to a realm of the 'eidos' as primary being, which can only be grasped through metaphor and experience.

Aristotle places the study of being and phenomena on an integrated and 'academic' basis inaugurally, but makes the immersion in *aporia* the centre of his analysis of philosophy and being, and centrally invokes φρόνησις - *phronesis* in his thinking about values.

Paul the Apostle, the major inaugurator of Christianity, considers the conception of Christ's sacrifice by crucifixion 'a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks', not to be assimilated to the Jewish conception of Justice nor to the Greek conception of Logos (**John's** Gospel takes a more Greek stance, but in a very radical fashion, of course), rather appealing to faith and its absurdity. He was followed in this by **Tertullian**, and even **Augustine**, who despite his neo-Platonism appeals to 'faith seeking understanding' (in which, according to **Barth**, he is also followed fideistically by **Anselm**), **Occam**, **Luther**, **Pascal**, **Hamann**, **Kierkegaard**, and **Barth**.

Despite the greater rationalism of mediaeval Christianity, **Aquinas** nevertheless emphatically introduces the clear distinction between Revelation and Natural Reason, and in **Duns Scotus** and **Occam** an ever more intensifying trend towards *central recognition of individual identity and then volition* enters Western thought, which breaks into ever greater dominance from the Renaissance onwards.

In plays like *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, **Shakespeare** presents a world in which the canonical values and rationalities are breaking down irretrievably, and in which both only the individual can be a source of healing transformation, yet, at the same time, the breakdown of lawful hierarchy of the great chain of being by individualism, and egotism, gone wild, is the very source of the problem. Whilst **Donne** and the metaphysical poets aspire to rationalism, their rationalism is one which has gone, however marvellously, quite to extremes, and, with the Civil War, and then the attempt at 'control order' of the linear thinking Enlightenment, succumbs to what TS Eliot called 'Dissociation of Sensibility'.... In this there are, however partially, hints at a 'third position', to which we shall return.

Descartes, **Spinoza**, and **Leibniz**, are rationalists par excellence. But **Descartes** appeals to the self-evidence of consciousness as immediate experience not inference; within his system **Spinoza** develops the voluntarist tending conception of 'conatus'; and **Leibniz** appeals to a monadic individual concept of 'apperception' which implies pan-psychism and the modern

notion of the unconscious. **Kant**, evolving from this, invokes a concept of *foundational transcendental self-consciousness*, which is based on and argued for as pure φρόνησις - *phronesis*, being one of the most mysterious though fascinating philosophical coinages ever discovered, and then taken on into the realm of *reciprocal consciousness* by the supposed arch-rationalist, **Hegel**, in whom this magnificent tension between φρόνησις - *phronesis* and a residual simplistic rationalism runs right through the whole of his philosophy. The reductivism of the Empiricists reaches its culmination in the scepticism of **Hume**, and his appeal to *sentiment* as the basis for both action and knowledge, something which, stripped of his reductionism, is very near to φρόνησις - *phronesis*.

At the time when a restoration of the Dissociation of Sensibility begins, in Romanticism, despite the strong rationalistic element in **Coleridge**, in another sense he was one of the greatest intuitivists of all time, who restored the concept of *imagination* to centrality, in which development his concept was taken even further by **Keats**. **GM Hopkins**'s supreme 19th Century poetry is composed under the aegis of a Catholicism reached via **Newman**'s influence which also embraces **Duns Scotus**'s transcendental individualism. **Blake**'s reaction against the 18th Century is similar.

In the 20th Century, besides what has already been touched on, **Russell**'s logical empiricism ends as radically as **Hume**'s, in *Human Knowledge: its Scope and Limits*. **Husserl**'s rationalism remains as dependent as that of **Descartes** on *the unreducible apprehension of sheer immediate presence*, and is developed in **Heidegger** into a thoroughgoingly Greek concept of Being based upon φρόνησις - *phronesis*. **Wittgenstein** evolves from a systematic logical rationalism into a dependence on conceptions very like φρόνησις - *phronesis*, and eventually issues in the circular, arguably sceptical and **Humean**, activist conception of certitude as opposed to conceptual knowledge, which he develops in *On Certainty* and which takes him on the same path **Nietzsche** trod in *The Will to Power*. In theology **Karl Barth** develops a comprehensive *fideism* which draws upon **Anselm**'s appeal to *faith seeking understanding*.

Derrida and Post-Modernism are the ripe culmination of all this and not an aberration.

TS Eliot and **DH Lawrence** both evolve fideistically towards versions of of belief, Christian or Pagan or something in between.

FR Leavis, in opposing rampant scientism and technocracy in **Heideggerian** fashion, moves cautiously towards a kind of complex messianic vision, which never quite emerges completely from the closet, but in which the **Wittgenstein**-like appeal to *enactment* does not move towards an anti-knowledge concept, but rather towards *Living Historicity*. This 'third position' concept is increasingly found in other modern thinkers, such as **John Lukacs**, and is probably also the basis of **Derridean** Post-Modernism. And naturally it leads us back towards a reinvisageing of **Hegel** (see *The Future of Hegel* by Catherine Malabou).