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INTRODUCTION



The Cambridge Platonists: some new studies

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The collection of papers in this issue of *BJHP* is devoted to the group of English seventeenth-century philosophers who have come to be known as the Cambridge Platonists. These philosophers need no apology in a history of philosophy journal, but their significance for the subject is nonetheless worth reiterating. Their sobriquet, acquired two centuries posthumously, belies the fact that they were at the forefront of the reception of the new philosophy in the period and were an important part of the philosophical context for Hobbes and Locke. Philosophers from this group are to be encountered frequently in philosophical debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – on one occasion in direct encounter (More with Descartes), but more commonly through the arguments in books: Cudworth, More and Conway engaged with Hobbes, Descartes and Spinoza. Shaftesbury acknowledged his debt to Whichcote, while Leibniz chose to position himself as a philosopher in relation to More, Cudworth and Conway. Pierre Bayle paid Cudworth the back-handed compliment of a critique of his conception of ‘Plastic Nature’. But it is not just because of their association with some of the great names of philosophical history that the Cambridge Platonists deserve attention. They themselves tackled the big themes of seventeenth-century philosophy: materialism, determinism, scepticism, and atheism. In metaphysics, epistemology, psychology and ethics they contributed original and innovative ideas on a variety of philosophical themes, including free will, causation, the nature of virtue and ideas on space. They were also the first English thinkers to present themselves as philosophers of religion. And as some of the first philosophers to write in English, their legacy to the conceptual vocabulary of English language philosophy includes such familiar terms as ‘materialism’, ‘consciousness’, ‘philosophy of religion’ and ‘Cartesianism’. Far from being ivory-tower solipsists, their intellectual relations extended well beyond the academy, and they are distinguished by their hospitality to philosophical women: Anne Conway was tutored by Henry More; Mary Astell owed her

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philosophical self-education partly to reading his books. Cudworth's daughter, Damaris, was also a philosopher: although she was influenced by Locke, she acknowledged her debt to her 'friends' the 'Platonists'. By any count, the Cambridge Platonists are part of the rich texture of early modern philosophy – arguably at the forefront of new thinking. Yet the standard story of seventeenth-century philosophy, which divides philosophers into empiricist and rationalist camps, and judges what makes philosophy modern, and therefore interesting, in terms of a rupture with its past, has difficulty in accommodating them as anything but marginal figures. As a result, their contribution to seventeenth-century philosophy tends to be overlooked or misunderstood. Their relationship to their more famous peers has puzzled historians of philosophy, and the possibility of their long-term influence is still routinely dismissed.¹ Their Platonism is often mistakenly assumed to be incompatible with an interest in, even understanding of, the new experimental science.² Fortunately, more critical and historically attuned historians of philosophy have spear-headed a renaissance of interest, especially in their moral philosophy and its eighteenth-century legacy (see, e.g. Darwall, *The British Moralists*; Taliaferro and Tepy, *Cambridge Platonist Spirituality*; Gill, *The British Moralists*; Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*) but also in their metaphysics, and philosophy of religion (Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*; Reid, *The Metaphysics of Henry More*; Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason*; Leech, *The Hammer of the Cartesians*). It is appropriate, in the centenary year of Cudworth's birth, to register this renewal of interest. The present collection follows this lead to offer a selection of papers illustrative of the character, vitality and diversity of Cambridge Platonism.

There are so many ways in which the Cambridge Platonists do not fit modern conceptions of philosophy or the received picture of early modern philosophy. Their style of argument, which wears its learning on its sleeve, is not to modern tastes. As religious philosophers, they appear out of tune with the perceived secular drift of modern philosophy. Yet their concern with the compatibility of philosophy and religion, and their anti-atheistical stance, is of a piece with the natural philosophers of the time, like Boyle and Newton, who sought to affirm the compatibility of their scientific pursuits with religious belief. The designation 'Cambridge Platonism' itself, a term

¹Ernst Cassirer's assessment that, philosophically, Cambridge Platonism was a dead end (Cassirer, *Die Platonische Renaissance*) has gone unchallenged to this day, to the prejudice of their philosophical reputation. If anything this prejudice has been reinforced: K. Joanna S. Forstrom confidently pronounces them 'failures' (Forstrom, *John Locke and Personal Identity*, 77), while Mark Goldie, who regards them merely as 'clergymen', declares with similar confidence of Cambridge Platonism in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 'The school may be said to reach its close with the death of More in 1687 and Cudworth in 1688'. More recently Dmitri Levitin outdoes a long line of mis-interpreters by pronouncing Cambridge Platonism to be 'non-existent', and declaring Cudworth to be a philologist, not a philosopher (Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*).

²Jon Parkin, for example, attempts to separate Culverwell and Whichcote for this reason (Parkin, *Science and Religion and Politics*, 80).

which was coined sometime in the nineteenth century, is not without its disadvantages. It is often taken to mean that they constituted a closely unified school of philosophers, and even that they were philosophical recidivists, if they were philosophers at all. However, if philosophical schools are defined in terms of shared interests and concerns, and the fact that they were recognized as such, then the Cambridge Platonists deserve to be considered a school. The central figures were Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), Peter Sterry (1613–72), Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), Henry More (1614–87), John Smith (1618–52) and Nathaniel Culverwell (1619–51), among whom Whichcote, More and Cudworth are represented here. Others who can be regarded as members of the school include Anne Conway (1630–79), George Rust (died 1670) and John Norris (1657–1712), to name just three. Although they did not call themselves Platonists, never mind *Cambridge* Platonists, the sobriquet is appropriate in so far as they were all connected, directly or indirectly with the University of Cambridge, and, for all the diversity within the group, they share broadly the same metaphysical foundations rooted in the Platonic tradition.

If the Cambridge Platonists have not been well served by historians of philosophy, it is also the case, paradoxically, that even those who take a sympathetic view of them have done them a disservice. The anthology, *The Cambridge Platonists*, edited by C. A. Patrides has played an important role in making their writings available to twentieth-century readers. It is in many respects remarkable for its scholarship. Even on first publication, however Patrides' shortcomings were noted (Dockrill, 'Review') – the omission of Nathaniel Culverwell on questionable grounds, for example, accounts for why some scholars deny he may be considered a Cambridge Platonist. More seriously, as Stephen Clark shows, Patrides gives a distorted account of the nature of their Platonism. His paper 'Patrides, Plotinus and the Cambridge Platonists' offers a corrective to Patrides; in particular he shows that his account is marred by a series of misunderstandings of the positions both of the Cambridge Platonists and of one of their key philosophical mentors, Plotinus. This is a cautionary tale in the dangers of allowing modern assumptions to cloud assessments of the thought of earlier times, which has applications well beyond the case of Patrides. As an anthology of texts, his book retains usefulness since it is one of the few modern editions available, but it can no longer be considered a reliable introduction to Cambridge Platonism.

Henry More's most enduring claim for philosophical attention is the correspondence which, as a young man, he conducted with Descartes. These letters contain discussion of topics which he would develop in his mature philosophy. Among these Igor Agostini focuses on More's argument for the infinity of the world, in which he challenges Descartes to consider the world as infinite, against Descartes' claim that it is only possible to hold that the extent of the world is indefinite. Against the prevailing view established by

Laporte and Koyré, he argues that More misunderstands Descartes' claim that matter and extension are identical, and that Descartes' admission that a finite world is contradictory was not a concession to More. What is at stake is the nature of logical inference. Descartes rejects the infinity of the world as a logical impossibility, because it cannot be grounded on the correlation of matter and extension. Just because something appears to be a contradiction to us does not mean that it is also so for God. So to assume that our finite minds can determine the limits of God's powers is to attempt to place limitations on God.

With the emergence of new philosophical themes in contemporary philosophy, new lines of enquiry are generated in the history of philosophy. One such topic is philosophical reflection on animals, a rich source for which is to be found in the philosophy of Henry More. As Cecilia Muratori argues in her article, 'Henry More on Animals', his views have hitherto been discussed solely in relation to his critique of the mechanistic Cartesian conception of animals. But, as she shows, More's discussion of animals is more extensive and complex than this. Questions relating to animals are integral to his psychological theory, ethics and critique of atheism. She highlights the tension between the positive role which More accords animals in his defence of a providential God, and More's negative account of animality or the 'animal life' in every soul. More cannot, therefore, be characterized straightforwardly as sentimental about animals.

As philosophers in a humanist mould, it was natural for the Cambridge Platonists to have high regard for the philosophers of antiquity. But this was not mere antiquarianism: like the humanists of the Renaissance and the scholars of their own day, their interest was driven by the perceived relevance of ancient philosophy to the philosophy of their own time. This is a view familiar to philosophers from the example of Leibniz. In his discussion of More's neglected work of ethics, his *Enchiridion ethicum*, John Sellars examines More's use of Stoicism, to show just how strongly More's view of ancient philosophy was coloured by the humanist scholarship of the Renaissance.

In his paper 'Gods and Giants', Douglas Hedley sets out the philosophical underpinnings of Ralph Cudworth's mode of reflection on atheism, which was for him a defining problem. He argues that in his confrontation with contemporary philosophers like Hobbes and Spinoza, Cudworth drew on a living tradition of Platonism in which he deployed arguments first used by ancient Platonists against the materialism, scepticism and relativism of the Stoics, Epicureans and Sextus Empiricus. In so doing, he drew on a time-honoured strand of Christian apologetics which took opinions from ancient philosophers to construct an 'ancient theology' in defence of monotheism. And he shows that this aspect of Cudworth's philosophy was integrally connected to his authoritative standing in the eighteenth century.

Cudworth's posthumously published *Treatise on Eternal and Immutable Morality* has contributed significantly to his reputation as a rationalist moral philosopher. But this is at odds with the claim by Stephen Darwall that love is the fundamental principle in Cambridge Platonist ethics. By focusing on two of Cudworth's unpublished manuscripts, in his essay 'Cudworth on Super-intellectual Instinct as Inclination to the Good', David Leech shows that Cudworth did indeed develop a conception of love which is central to his conception of the moral life. This is his idea of 'superintellectual love', or love as a natural instinct towards the good. His discussion of this examines some of the tensions that arise in relation to free will and grace.

Christian Hengstermann's paper on George Rust is the first of two papers on the Cambridge Platonists' wider circle. They were, of course, Christian philosophers, whose Platonism was distilled through many accretions of later Platonism, including the Christian Platonism of Alexandria. The importance of the third-century theologian Origen as an antecedent for their own Platonising Christian philosophy has been largely overlooked. In his study of Rust's 'rational theodicy', Christian Hengstermann argues that Origen was a decisive source of their metaphysics, and that Origen's teaching on the freedom of the will in pre-existent souls, universal divine goodness and the eschatological doctrine of *apokatastasis*, constitute key elements of Rust's Origenian philosophy of religion.

In her paper, 'Time, Space and Process in Anne Conway', Emily Thomas takes up the question of whether Anne Conway's philosophy anticipates Leibniz, by examining Conway's treatment of time, space and process. Against those, like Peter Loftson, who have argued, that her views on time and space prefigure Leibniz's, she argues that Conway's views on these matters are far from Leibnizian and are in fact closer to More's. Conway's holenmarian conception of God's presence in time brings her particularly close to More – holenmarianism or 'whole-in-part-ism' being the doctrine according to which something may be present in the whole while simultaneously being present in every part. On the other hand, Thomas argues that Conway's dynamic conception of substances continually changing constitutes a 'process philosophy', which has parallels with Leibniz rather than More. In this way, she reconfigures the intellectual relationship between Conway, More and Leibniz.

Two papers consider aspects of the Cambridge Platonists' philosophical legacy. First, Mogens Lærke shows how Henry More became a posthumous participant in debates between the Spinozist, Georg Wachter and Leibniz concerning the metaphysics of creation in the Jewish kabbalah. If kabbalah seems remote from philosophy today, it was then believed that these texts were vehicles of an esoteric Jewish philosophy (*philosophia hebraeorum*), dating from earliest history. Part of the interest that they attracted was on account of the perceived parallels with Spinoza. Henry More contributed a series of

comments to Knorr von Rosenroth's translation of kabbalistic texts, the *Kabbala denudata*. More argued that kabbalist account of creation represented a 'mixed form of philosophy' that included dangerous elements. Long afterwards Wachter wrote a refutation of More's view, which provoked a response from Leibniz. Lærke argues that Leibniz agreed with More's interpretation of kabbalist account of creation, and that he shared with More an approach to interpreting emanationist language.

The second discussion of the Cambridge Platonists' philosophical influence is Friedrich Uehlein's paper on Shaftesbury and the man often considered as one of the shapers of Cambridge Platonism, Benjamin Whichcote. In terms of philosophical output Whichcote was a lesser figure than Cudworth and More, but his ethical views were very much in tune with theirs. Like Joseph Butler in the next century, his moral philosophy is contained in sermons. The sermons were sufficiently attractive to Shaftesbury that he edited a collection of them. And it is generally accepted in the scholarship that Shaftesbury's own philosophy is indebted to Whichcote. In a detailed analysis of Shaftesbury's *Askemata* and Whichcote's sermons, Friedrich Uehlein confirms this received view of the formative influence on Shaftesbury, arguing that his editing of Whichcote's sermons played a decisive role in developing his arguments against Locke. Shaftesbury's edition of Whichcote's sermons served as a conduit for Whichcote's views in the early enlightenment.

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