CHAPTER I

CUDWORTH AND HIS PREDECESSORS

Cudworth is a Cambridge Platonist; that phrase has pinned him, decisively, in the historian’s display-case. The facts are indisputable. He lived at Cambridge, except for a brief interval, from 1630, when he entered Emmanuel as a pensioner, until 1688, when he died, as Master of Christ’s College. He was a Platonist, although his Platonism was that of the Renaissance, innocent of modern scholarship. And it is not merely convenient but, from certain points of view, essential to think of him as a member of a school: the religious outlook which colours all his writings, with its emphasis on moral goodness and its distrust of all mechanical rules, was the common faith of all who fell under the influence of Benjamin Whichcote.

Does it follow, as is so often assumed, that Cudworth’s philosophy is of interest only to antiquarians, not at all to philosophers, or even to the historian of modern ideas? So sympathetic an interpreter as F. J. Powicke will not put the importance of Cudworth’s writings more strongly than this: ‘a rich quarry to which an occasional student has been indebted for apt quotations and curious references’. Perhaps he had in mind Berkeley’s ‘learned Dr Cudworth’; perhaps Locke’s praise of The True Intellectual System as a book ‘wherein that very learned author, hath with such accurateness and judgment, collected and explained the opinions of the Greek philosophers’; in any case, there is evidence to spare that Cudworth’s writings were an important repository of classical learning.

1 The Cambridge Platonists, p. 116.
2 Siris, § 255.
3 Thoughts on Education.
4 cf. Warburton’s extensive pillaging of Cudworth in The Divine Legation, in its time a most influential work.
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But that is not the whole story. Cudworth, wrote Pierre Bayle, ‘avait joint ensemble deux qualités qui ne vont guère de compagnie. Il avait une lecture prodigieuse et un pénéetration d’esprit extraordinaire.’ This combination of qualities had already, when Cudworth wrote, passed out of fashion; and now that the ‘prodigious reading’ has come to seem prodigiously uncritical—looking at it as we do from the vantage-point of several centuries of scholarship—it is tempting to underrate Cudworth’s ‘pénétration d’esprit’ and to minimize the extent of his influence. That influence we shall later describe in some detail, but one general problem has to be faced at the outset. Was his influence that of a reactionary?

This is certainly the prevalent view; Leslie Stephen in the Dictionary of National Biography says of him that ‘he scarcely appreciates the modern theories of Bacon, Descartes and Spinoza’; Burtt that he was ‘a thinker essentially conservative and failing to share the dominant interests of the main current of his day’\(^1\). On the face of it, these judgments are amply justified. Our first impression of Cudworth’s writings is that he was a man completely submerged by classical learning, an inheritor and exponent of the dullest kind of Renaissance humanism. It would be foolish to deny that this first impression is also, to a certain extent, our last impression. This is not the side of Cudworth which I intend to emphasize: Cassirer in his Die Platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge and Aspelin in his Ralph Cudworth’s Interpretation of Greek Philosophy have made sufficiently clear the extent, and the character, of Cudworth’s indebtedness to Renaissance philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola and Ficino.

At the same time, Cudworth was a member of the Royal Society. His library contained its Harvey, Boyle, Tycho Brahe, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton; among philosophers, in the modern sense, were Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes,


\(^2\) *art. Cudworth*.

\(^3\) *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 142.
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Gassendi, Spinoza. This already suggests that our first impression may not be wholly trustworthy. Then again, much of his work is a sustained polemic against Hobbes. Is this characteristic of a man who turns his back on the ideas of his own period, an antiquarian concerned to glorify and revive the past? This polemic, it might be thought, was so obvious a duty that the most determined recluse could not escape the battle; Warburton has described how ‘every young churchman militant would needs try his arms in thundering against Hobbes’s steel-cap’. But Cudworth initiated this tradition: his was the first full-length attack on Hobbes; it was in no sense expected of him.

When, in the light of these facts, we turn again to The True Intellectual System, we can readily detect the modern philosophy beneath the panoply of scholarship. His immediate successors were not misled. Hume, for example, thinks of him as a philosopher, not as a scholar, and Hume was anything but lavish in his references to his predecessors. Again, while it is true enough, as Stephen says, that Cudworth ‘scarcely appreciated’ Bacon and Spinoza, if ‘appreciated’ means liked, this is not true if it means weighed and considered; as for Descartes, Cudworth both admired him and considered him. These points are worth making in detail, partly to remove a prevalent misconception, partly because we can scarcely understand Cudworth’s philosophy except in the context established by his contemporaries.

First, for Bacon. Towards his philosophy Cudworth felt a great antipathy. He is prepared to concede this much good in him, that he rightly attacked anthropomorphism in physical science: ‘Some, indeed, have unskilfully attributed their own properties, or animal idiosyncrasies, to inanimate bodies; as when they say, that matter desires forms, as the

1 Bibliotheca Cudworthiana, a catalogue of the sale of books at Roll’s Coffee-House, London, 1690.
2 Cumberland’s De Legibus Naturae appeared in 1672, six years before Cudworth’s book; but Cudworth had been ready for publication in 1671, and had been composing his book for many years before that date.
3 cf. Enquiry, Part I, VII.
female does the male; and that heavy bodies descend by appetite towards the centre, that so may rest therein; and that they sometimes ascend in discretion, to avoid a vacuum. 1

But the rejection of anthropomorphism, so Cudworth argues, does not involve us in the rejection of final causes; in thinking that it does ‘the Advancer of Learning’ makes his greatest mistake. Cudworth’s reputation as a reactionary is often made to rest, simply, on this adherence to final causes in biology. Thus Dugald Stewart, in his discussion of Bacon’s rejection of final causes, alleges that Cudworth’s criticism of Bacon ‘must be imputed to a superstitious reverence for the remains of Grecian learning, accompanied with a corresponding dread of the unknown dangers to be apprehended from philosophical innovations’ 2. Yet Spinoza spoke no less severely of Bacon (‘he delivered himself confusedly enough and proved next to nothing’ 3), and the influence of Cudworth’s reformulated teleology, the theory of ‘plastic natures’, on scientists like Robert Boyle and John Ray, the reception, appreciative and critical, which greeted his theory on the Continent—Le Clerc, Bayle, Leibniz 4 all paid more than passing attention to it—sufficiently indicate that it was no mere rehash of an established position. Cudworth’s theory was not to prevail (although it would not be at all surprising to find that it was directly continuous, through devious ways, with later doctrines of élan vital), but there was a good deal more behind it than ‘a superstitious reverence for the remains of Grecian wisdom’. Otherwise, Cudworth has not a great deal to say about Bacon, although he loses no opportunity to jibe at the ‘affected language’ of ‘idols’. He does not specifically discuss Bacon’s sharp separation of religion from science, of faith from reason, a dichotomy which is alien to the whole tendency

2 Philosophy of the Human Mind, Part II, ch. XI.
3 Spinoza’s first letter to Oldenburg.
4 ‘Je suis donc de l’avis de Mr Cudworth (dont l’excellent ouvrage me revient extrêmement dans la plus grand parti) que les lois du Méchanisme seules ne sauroient former un animal’, Considerations sur la Principe de Vie (Histoire des Ouvrages des Savants, Mai 1705).
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of Cambridge Platonism. Whichcote wrote: ‘I oppose not rational to spiritual; for spiritual is most rational’; and nothing could more succinctly express Cudworth’s own conviction. On this matter, he was prepared to let his philosophy speak for itself.

The case of Spinoza is somewhat more difficult. If Cudworth had ignored Spinoza, this would not have been at all surprising. When Leslie Stephen says of Cudworth that ‘he scarcely appreciated Spinoza’, this accusation, even if it were true, would do nothing to prove that he was a scholarly recluse, for exactly the same could be said of Cudworth’s ‘empiricist’ successors. Explicit references to Spinoza are certainly not common in The True Intellectual System; I can trace only two. In the first, Spinoza (disguised as ‘a late writer’) is criticized as an ally of Hobbes in promulgating ‘the atheistic account of religion’s so generally prevailing in the world, from its being a fit engine of state’; in the second ‘that late theological politician’ is condemned as the author of a discourse on miracles ‘so weak, groundless, and inconceivable, that we did not think it here to deserve a refutation’. I suspect, however, that Spinoza played quite an important role in determining the structure of The True Intellectual System. Very considerable sections of that book are devoted to a criticism of ‘hylozoistic atheism’, of which Cudworth writes as follows: ‘Though it were long since started by Strato, yet because it afterwards slept in perfect silence and oblivion, [it] should have been here by us passed by silently, had we not had certain knowledge of its being of late awakened and revived by some, who were so sagacious as to perceive that the atomic form [of atheism] could never do their business . . . ; as also that this, in all probability, would, ere long, publicly appear upon the stage, though not

1 Third letter to Dr Tuckney.
2 Berkeley refers to Spinoza in his Commonplace Book, Hume seems to have read Bayle’s account of him but nothing more (cf. Laird, Hume’s Philosophy of Human Nature, pp. 163 ff).
3 T.I.S., 2, 504.
4 T.I.S., 3, 4.
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bare-faced, but under a disguise. Who were these mysterious revivers of the ancient view that matter as such was alive? Almost certainly it was Spinoza and his school that Cudworth had in mind. (In one of his manuscripts Cudworth refers to Spinoza as ‘a kind of hylozoick atheist’.)

It needs to be remembered that the imprimatur of The True Intellectual System is dated 1671, although the actual date of publication was 1678. That it contains any reference at all to the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670) is, in these circumstances, quite surprising; and the only work of Spinoza’s Cudworth would have had any opportunity of reading at leisure is his Principles of the Cartesian Philosophy. Cudworth refers us to a much fuller exposition of ‘hylozoistic atheism’, which was shortly to appear. Now, we know that Cudworth was corresponding with the liberal Dutch Arminians, men like Limborch. We know also that Spinoza’s works circulated in manuscript, so that Cudworth’s hints of dreadful things to come are at least consistent with the hypothesis that his attack on hylozoism is particularly directed against Spinoza. One must admit that the details of his criticism have little relevance to Spinozism. Characteristically, Cudworth prefers to criticize hylozoism in its classical form, but when he rejects as hylozoistic the doctrine that ‘extension and life, or cogitation, are two inadequate conceptions of one and the self-same substance, considered brokenly and by piecemeal . . . ; and, consequently, all souls and minds, and even the Deity itself [is] either extended life and cogitation, or living and thinking extension’ ⁴ we can have little doubt whose teaching he is rejecting.

Bacon, then, Cudworth knew, but did not highly regard; Spinoza he knew only imperfectly but interpreted as reviving a tradition which was worth opposing in detail. His relation

1 T.I.S., Preface, p. 56. He is not, as one might be inclined to suspect, attacking Renaissance pantheism; pantheism he regards as a muddled sort of theism.

2 4982a, 55.

3 G. von Hertling, John Locke und die Schule von Cambridge, p. 164 n.

4 T.I.S., 3, 394.

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to Descartes is much more intimate. Many of the fundamental principles of Cudworth’s philosophy do not derive (immediately) either from his own or from Greek speculation but from Descartes; a fact usually overlooked, often denied, by writers on Cudworth. ¹ The exception is J. A. Stewart in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*; he recognizes the influence, but does not indicate in what it consisted; later writers, like Muirhead, have joined earlier ones like Tulloch in denying that the influence was at all substantial.

Muirhead, indeed, sets out to show that the roots of Cambridge Platonism lie in Christian Platonism and that it was not affected, or not fundamentally, by the new developments in seventeenth-century philosophy and science. He advances two positive reasons for thinking that Cartesian influence on Cudworth was of little or no consequence. The first is that ‘we have the evidence of the poet Milton, writing in 1644 that tradition at that date still reigned in Cambridge providing only ‘an asinine feast of sow thistles and brambles’; and there is no evidence that Whichcote, the founder of the school, was at all influenced by Descartes.’² So much can be granted: University courses do not change overnight, and it was not until the sixteen-seventies that Cartesian text-books were introduced into the University. It is not surprising that Milton should encounter nothing but scholasticism in the Cambridge of 1644; he would not be likely to know that Cambridge professors were corresponding with Descartes as early as 1640. The real question is what he would have met with twenty years later. That there was a welcome for ‘the new philosophy’ at Cambridge, as there was not at Oxford, is indisputable.³ As for Whichcote, he was not in any professional sense a philosopher; Cudworth was profoundly influenced by his religious and moral outlook but had scarcely

² *The Platonist Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy,* p. 25.
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anything else to learn from him. We shall quite misunder-
s tand Cambridge Platonism if we think that it contained from
the beginning Cudworth’s philosophical doctrines, or indeed
that it was as united in philosophical belief as it was (even
then with reservations) in its religious sentiments.

The other point raised by Muirhead is more serious. He
admits that at one time the Cambridge Platonists (More
especially) thought that the Cartesian philosophy had a
certain affinity with their own views, but he quotes Cudworth’s
judgment on the Cartesiansthat they have ‘an undiscovered
tang of the mechanically-atheistic humour hanging about
them’—as epitomizing the mature judgment of Cambridge
Platonism on Cartesianism. Now, when Cudworth talks in
this way, as he does more than once, it is always in criticism
of a single point in Descartes’ philosophy, viz. the theory of
animal mechanism. So far, Descartes was in the camp of
the enemy, but no further. It is still not misleading to call
Cudworth a Cartesian, so great was their agreement on so
many vital issues.

These points of agreement are easily enough overlooked
in the great bulk of Cudworth’s writing. Perhaps that is why
Tulloch asserts that ‘to the famous doctrine of Consciousness
[i.e. the Cogito] with the principle of certitude based upon it,
there is singularly no allusion either in Cudworth or More’2,
when Cudworth had written: ‘though it should be supposed
that our senses did deceive us in all their representations, and
that there were no sun, no moon, no earth, that we had no
hands, no feet, no body, as by sense we seem to have, yet
reason tells us that of necessity that must be something, to
whom these things seem to be, because nothing can seem to
be to that that is not.’3 As for ‘certitude’, no one could be a
more enthusiastic supporter of the doctrine of clear and
distinct perceptions: ‘No man’, he writes, ‘ever was or can be
deceived in taking that for an epistemonical truth which he
clearly and distinctly apprehends, but only in asentting to

1 T.I.S., 1, 280.
2 Rational Theology in the Seventeenth Century, p. 294.
3 E.I.M., 2, 6, 2.
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things not clearly apprehended by him, which is the only true original of all error.'

It is true that he rejects the Cartesian ‘divine guarantee’. He accepted, perhaps originated, the criticism common in seventeenth-century England, that Descartes had argued in a circle. ‘For whereas some would endeavour to prove the truth of their intellectual faculties from hence, that there is a God, whose nature is also such as that he cannot deceive; it is plain that this is nothing but a circle and makes no progress at all, forasmuch as all the certainty which they have of the existence of God, and of his nature, depends wholly upon the arbitrary make of their faculties.’ But Cudworth opposes Descartes only because he thinks Descartes has been false to his own doctrine. Clear and distinct perception, according to Cudworth, needs no guarantee. Not even God could make it false that whatever thinks exists. This is to oppose Descartes by Cartesianism, not by unreflective conservatism.

It may be objected that on this matter Descartes was himself in the Christian tradition, and so should not be considered an independent influence. But whatever the justice of this objection, the same cannot possibly be said of Descartes’ theory of the corporeal; and here, too, Cudworth is his disciple; the atomic theory, he considers, is the best possible foundation of theism, provided only that it is combined with dualism of the Cartesian sort, i.e. with the denial that mind

1 *E.I.M.*, 4, 5, 5.
2 cf. Lamprecht, *The Role of Descartes*, p. 215. The passage from Glanvill quoted by Lamprecht naturally precedes, in date of publication, the passage quoted below from Cudworth. But Glanvill was an Oxford convert to Cambridge Platonism, and had probably taken over this argument with so much else. It is interesting to notice that Glanvill’s Platonism did not prevent him from being a zealous defender of the Royal Society and the New Science in general. On one point, indeed, he differs sharply from Cudworth: he is a great admirer of ‘the famous Verulam’ (cf. his *Plus Ultra*). He is perhaps too little conscious of the points of difference between Cambridge Platonism and the New Science, but it seemed to nobody incongruous that he should declare his allegiance at once to the Royal Society and to More and Cudworth.
3 *E.I.M.*, 4, 5, 6.
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is a body. ‘We can never sufficiently applaud that ancient atomical philosophy, so successfully revived of late by Cartesius, in that it shows distinctly what matter is.’ (Descartes had disclaimed any association with Democritus and disliked being thought of as a reviver—but that is a different matter.)

Furthermore, as we shall see later, he follows Descartes closely in his distinction between sense and thought, denying, for example, that sense acquaints us with the real nature of body on the ground that ‘a body may be changed to all the several senses, and remain really the same that it was before⁴. Even the Cartesian illustration reappears in a form but slightly modified: ‘just as when a man looking down out of the streets, is said to see men walking in the streets, when indeed he sees nothing but hats and clothes, under which, for all he knows, there may be Daedalian statues moving up an down.’⁵

Cudworth’s theory of the relation between mind and body is equally Cartesian. Mind is ‘a distinct substance’ which is ‘intimately conjoined to the body’. And once more there is a Cartesian analogy: if mind were contained in its body as a mariner is in a ship it would not feel pain when the body is hurt, but would contemplate the body’s injuries as the mariner contemplates an injury to his ship.⁶

To take a final instance, Cudworth’s whole theory of sensation (even down to the physiology) is indebted to Cartesianism, both in its general outlines and in detail. Thus, for example, Cudworth’s distinction between ‘volitions in the soul to eat and drink’, ‘a sense of pain when the body is hurt’ and ‘the grief and sadness that arises from some ill-tidings told and understood by the mind’⁶ is an echo of a well-known

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¹ E.I.M., 4, 6, 15. In his Preface to The True Intellectual System Cudworth blames Plato and Aristotle for introducing ‘those exploded qualities and forms’ into philosophy. On this important point Cudworth is no Platonist.

² Principles of Philosophy, Part IV, CCI.

³ E.I.M., 3, 3, 3.


⁶ E.I.M., 3, 1, 4.