

THE NEOPLATONISTS OF CAMBRIDGE

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INTRODUCTION

So vast is the diversity of opinions that have been expressed over the last one hundred years about Freemasonry and its historico-philosophical significance, that in trying to come to terms with them, one is likely to be overwhelmed by confusion. Some of these opinions are somewhat arbitrary insofar as the subject matter is concerned, and merely reflect the ideas of their authors. In this study we shall dwell once more upon the origins of philosophical Masonic thought, striving however to avoid facile assumptions and to keep to an interpretation of the data available to us that is as objective as possible, in an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of the complex phenomenon that is 'Freemasonry'.

When talking about the 'philosophy of Freemasonry', one has to ask oneself whether the philosophical category can really be applied to modern Freemasonry, or whether, defined by the well-known concept of 'a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols', Freemasonry should not simply call itself a moral and ethical code of conduct which is not underpinned by any particular organized system of thought. I start from such a point of enquiry, and through the analysis and study of the documentation available to us, I have been able to find an unquestionable influence of Neo-platonic thought on the birth and development of 'speculative' Freemasonry.

But where can we find traces of moral philosophy within the vast, and at the same time, incomplete and discontinuous Masonic documentation at our disposal? We all broadly agree about the derivation of the greater part of the Masonic catechisms from the ancient statutes (Ancient Rites) of the Medieval Operative Masonic Guilds. Yet it must be stressed that only within the Masonic ritual of the late eighteenth century is it possible to find the first traces of what we might call Masonic 'philosophy'.

In fact it becomes evident from the documentation that, in its initial stage, Freemasonry was only practical, or rather 'operative', and no particular attention was paid to ethical and moral matters. The admission of the non-operativists led, thanks also to their social influence, to a greater consideration of Freemasonry, which thus slowly changed its connotations and perceptions. Being a Freemason came to constitute a cause for social prestige. It is evident that from 1717 onwards a notable development of the ritualistic and ceremonial elements begins to take place, with a much greater presence of moral and ethical components, in comparison to previous decades. Between 1680 and 1730 in fact, various modifications were gradually introduced to the ceremonies by accepted Masons, but the changes were in any case not completely carried out by 1730, and the process of extension and evolution went on throughout the eighteenth century.

Without doubt the most important mutation was the division of the esoteric doctrine, and consequently the entire ritual, into three parts. To my mind such a development suggested the need to make a further distinction between 'accepted' Masons and 'speculative' Masons, since elements that may be classed as 'speculative' appear only in a phase following the official birth of Freemasonry (1717). The first, in my view, merely characterized the transitional phase from operative to accepted Freemasonry, whereas speculative Freemasonry was born and developed afterwards, inspired and permeated by platonic thought, and as such created for itself that particular autonomy and distinct reality, having its own type of absolute originality.

Why the Cambridge School? Because in my view, the Cambridge Platonists represented, in the period and historical context which witnessed the birth of speculative Freemasonry, the philosophy which fits more than any other with the moral and ethical dictates of Freemasonry itself. For the so-called 'speculative' Freemasons, there was a philosophy available to them which was perfectly suited to the moral and ethical principles that they wanted to convey through the symbology and allegory of 'operative' Freemasonry.

Certainly the Cambridge Platonists, by virtue of their 'anti-modernism', remained a niche philosophy at the time, and even subsequently, few scholars have been concerned with it. Indeed, as Cassirer recalls, who at the end of the forties brought them once more into the limelight: 'the Cambridge School opposes modern science as founded by Galileo and Kepler, for it sees therein only the support and forerunner of that mechanistic view of nature which on ethical and religious grounds it passionately resists'.

But it is precisely this return to 'traditional' ethics and morality, almost as if to foresee the future problems of a progress without restraint and moral limitations, which brings the Cambridge Platonists so close to Freemasonry and makes them topical again with the prevailing technicality which characterises modern society.

The Cambridge Platonists

'Withdraw within your self, and examine yourself. If you do not yet therein discover beauty, do as the artist, who cuts off, polishes, purifies until he has adorned his statue with all the marks of beauty. Remove from your soul, therefore, all that

is superfluous, straighten out all that is crooked, purify and illuminate what is obscure, and do not cease perfecting your statue until the divine resplendence of virtue shines forth upon your sight ... But if you try to fix on it an eye soiled by vice, an eye that is impure, or weak, so as not to be able to support the splendour of so brilliant an object, that eye will see nothing, not even if it were shown a sight easy to grasp. The organ of vision will first have to be rendered analogous and similar to the object it is to contemplate. Never would the eye have seen the sun unless first it had assumed its form; likewise, the soul could never see beauty, unless she herself first became beautiful.'
Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 6, ch. 9.

Misleading theories. In my opinion, we now have a need to trace the origins of Masonic thought which cannot be delayed any longer. In fact, evident weaknesses are often to be found in theories regarding the birth of modern Freemasonry, which is occasionally seen as no less than the realization of modern thought, or worse still as the forerunner of republican forms of democratic government, which were to develop in Europe in the eighteenth century. This is the theory of an American historian, Margaret Jacob, according to whom English Freemasonry was to have transferred, from England to Europe, a philosophy and a way of carrying out politics based on laws and constitutions, on elections and representative bodies, in Lodges where Brethren wield 'new forms of personal power and engage themselves in the practice of government and opposition'. Nothing could be further removed from Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry then, which may be identified essentially as 'a moral and ethical code of conduct, ... a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms, and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides.' If then, later on and in particular contexts, such as the French Revolution, the Italian Risorgimento and of the Portuguese Empire in Brazil, Freemasonry has acquired political and 'progressive' connotations, this does not mean that its origins were such.

The philosophical origins. If in the course of its continental expansion the original thought became distorted, it might be important to go back to the plausible philosophical theories that have influenced Masonic thought. The place usually given to the Cambridge School in the history of philosophical thought is, in light of this study and the quotations at our disposal, undoubtedly modest. The meagre attention paid to the Cambridge School is unquestionably due to its 'anti-modernist' connotations and to its role as an open opponent of 'empiricism'. By opposing the predominant trend in seventeenth century English thinking, that very empiricism, the Cambridge Platonists became 'niche' scholars, at times marginalised, but despite this no less original than their contemporaries, and they would go on to influence English society even after their deaths. Indeed, contrary to common theory which sees the realization of enlightenment and rationalist philosophy in Freemasonry, it is my conviction that it is precisely in Cambridge Platonism that the peculiarities of Masonic philosophy can be found.

But who were the Cambridge Platonists? Rather than blindly reproducing the theories of Plato, the Cambridge Platonists gave them an original interpretation of their own, which in certain aspects could even differ hugely from the original model. As Ernest Cassirer recalls: 'In these writers the teachings of Plato always appear, as it were, transformed through a refracting medium.'⁽¹⁾

It is above all the Florentine Academy, and in particular Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, that the Cambridge Neo-Platonists draw on in order to then conceive their 'own' version of the speculative platonic world. For both Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, as well as for the Cambridge philosophers, Plato was part of that unbroken chain of divine revelation which included, in addition to Plato, Moses, Zoroaster, Socrates, Hermes Trismegistus, Jesus Christ, Plotinus.

For example, one traditional idea was often deployed in connection with God's providential control of the universe. As More phrased it, 'the Antients' – specifically Hermes Trismegistus – 'have defined Him to be a Circle whose Centre is every where and Circumference no where'.⁽²⁾

Another interesting allegory is in Cudworth's 'True Intellectual System' which was designed both as a refutation of 'atheism' and as an affirmation of the order pervading the universe. The order was upheld in terms of the sacrosanct concept of the Scale of Nature so popular during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Here the Neoplatonists had again been instrumental, since they had maintained that 'all things are for ever linked', that the several parts of the universe are 'limbs of one entire body'. The Cambridge Platonists, in full agreement, asserted with Whichcote 'the Scale of the Creatures', with More the arrangement of all beings in 'distinct degree', and with Cudworth 'a Scale or Ladder of perfection in Nature, one above the other, as of Living and Animate Things, above Senseless and Inanimate; of Rational things above Sensitive'.⁽³⁾

Thus, a 'pious philosophy' demonstrating the possibility of perfect concomitance between philosophy and Christianity, a philosophy which existed even before the Christian revelation. The mixture of quotations from the Scriptures and constant references to neo-platonic metaphysics in their writings may point to one of the most recurrent accusations from theological orthodoxy which the Cambridge School found itself facing; precisely that of arbitrarily mixing the sacred with the profane.

To define this union of platonic and Christian doctrines as a simple form of syncretism is rather reductive. In order to gain a better understanding of the origins of this rapprochement between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', let us look at how Plotinus describes the doctrine of the soul. The soul, according to Plotinus, does not have a place in the cosmos which is fixed in a definitive way, because it is the soul's conduct which determines its very place. Immediately, then, we cannot but link this to the concept of the Dignity of Man set out by Pico della Mirandola which we analysed at length in the last lecture. So, Plotinus' soul, not being determined initially in any way, becomes that which is determined by itself,

especially at an ethical and metaphysical level. It is only the soul, which in departing from the sensible (that is, the perceptible) and tending towards the intelligible, can aspire to consciousness of the divine. It is not, therefore, through revelation that the soul can contemplate the divine, but, the divine being inside us, the soul can produce the divine within ourselves in an attempt to become similar to it. In the splendid excerpt taken from the Enneads and quoted at the beginning of this section, it is impossible not to notice the splendid analogies with Masonic thought, and, in particular, with the concept of the coarse stone which is to become smooth stone and the importance, so that such a process may be accomplished, of illumination, which recalls the Masonic concept of 'light'.

A New Vision of Religiosity.

Who and what were the theologian and doctrines to whom the Platonists of Cambridge related? The acceptance by the Cambridge Platonists of Plato and his disciples under the leadership of Plotinus went hand in hand with the bold rejection of the entire Western theological tradition from St. Augustine through the medieval scholars to the classical Protestantism of Luther, Calvin, and their various followers in the seventeenth century. Protestantism had of course repeatedly pleaded for a return to 'the primitive fathers', but it was always understood that Origen should be on the whole avoided and that the other Greek Fathers should be studied in the light of Tertullian and especially St Augustine. The Cambridge Platonists inverted this procedure with almost mathematical precision. They tended to silence Tertullian altogether; they invoked Augustine only if he happened to agree with the eagle-eyed philosophers. Among the major Western theologians only two found favour with the Cambridge Platonists: St Anselm, who provided the basis for their theory of the Atonement, and St Thomas Aquinas, who supplied them with the most advanced formulation of the Graeco-Roman theory of natural law.(4)

But to label the philosophy of the Cambridge Platonists as a 'theological rationalism', typical of the English deism of the seventeenth century, would simply be to coincide their idea of religious reason with the power of thought, and this is decidedly reductive if not completely misleading. In fact, the Cambridge Platonists not only went against dogmatic theology but also dogmatic logic, thus dogmatic based on faith and that based on the intellect, which both stand in the way of an understanding of the Divine, possible, as we have seen, only thanks to the positive direction of human will. As Ernst Cassirer recalls: 'In all the writings of the Cambridge thinkers, it is not so much a matter of extending the religious horizon as of penetrating into another dimension of religious experience. Differences of doctrinal opinion are not only tolerated, but welcomed... Yet the Cambridge Platonists are neither deists nor, as their adversaries constantly charged them with being, Arminians, Arians, or Socinians. They are plain religious moralists, the central point of whose faith lies in moral and religious conviction'. This differentiation with Deism is very important in my view and sheds light on the analogies between Freemasonry as a 'moral and ethical code of conduct', the fundamental condition for the perfection of the individual, and the vision of the Cambridge School just outlined.

The Cambridge Platonists find reason by itself insufficient. The precise nature of the challenge posed by the Cambridge Platonists may best be understood by glancing at the divers uses of the metaphor of the candle, ultimately deriving from Proverbs 20,27 (the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord). Protestants normally deployed the metaphor in order to emphasise the inadequacy of natural knowledge, to assert in particular that the Greek and Roman philosophers were immersed in darkness because they had only 'the dimme Candlelight of Nature', a light 'as a small candle: yea rather as little sparks, or as a glimmering', no more than the Glow-worm to the Sun'. This belief was shared even by individuals often associated with the Cambridge Platonists, for example Nathaniel Culverell and Peter Sterry. 'Though the candle of Reason excel in light the Glow-worms of sense', declared Sterry, 'yet it is but a candle, not the Sun it self; it makes no day; only shines in the darkness of the night'.

Tolerance and Brotherly Love. Important principles and analogies between Masonic thought and the philosophy of the Cambridge Platonists can be found in the concept of tolerance, especially regarding the opinions of others. These opinions are not to be aseptically or supinely accepted, but are to be held absolutely 'necessary' for our own consciousness and for the fulfilment of our 'process' of perfection. Even the concept of 'brotherly love', the cornerstone of Masonic thought, can be found in the writings of these original thinkers. Let us take Whichcote for example who, warning against religious 'certainty', says: 'Nothing spoils human Nature more than false Zeal. Because I may be Mistaken, I must not be dogmatical and confident, peremptory and imperious. I will not break the certain Laws of Charity, for a doubtful Doctrine or for an uncertain Truth'.

The connection with Nature and Science . What is also interesting is the analogy between the Neo-platonic concept of 'Nature' and the approach to nature made by the Freemason, to whom the following is said during the Second Degree or Ceremony of Passing: '... you are now permitted to extend your researches into the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science'. For the Cambridge philosophers, as Cassirer recalls: 'The science of nature, in so far as it is carried on in the proper sense, is therefore only apparently concerned with the world of the senses. It pursues a purely 'intelligible' goal, and seeks to liberate that reason which is fettered to the material world from its bondage and obscurity and make it clear and visible to the inquiring spirit as being of its own kind.'(5)

Reason and religion. But the Cambridge Neo-Platonists reach their pinnacle, in my opinion, in the extremely delicate field concerning the connections between reason and religion. For English empiricism the fields of science and faith are distinctly separate, the latter having absolute autonomy. According to Bacon, because science and faith belong to two different dimensions, they cannot converge but nor can they diverge, leaving the divine mysteries, which cannot be known philosophically, to be venerated in silence. But it is precisely this religion which completely avoids reason that the Cambridge philosophers refute, convinced as they are that the 'natural' and the 'spiritual' being cannot be distinctly separated, because the spiritual is nothing more than the purest and highest form of the selfsame rational being.

The Baconian demarcation, which would have set the field of experimentation free from the religious sphere, was nevertheless considered by the Platonists as a form of escape, of desertion which was going to cut off once and for all the link between God and man, denying him the possibility of knowing and coming close to things divine. But this does not mean that they were opposed to scientific research, one only need think that its two most representative thinkers, Cudworth and More, were members of the Royal Society. What they advocate is a vision of experience which is not directed one-sidedly towards the 'natural' world, but which also supports this 'spiritual' experience. Bacon's naturalistic induction must interact synergetically with ethical and religious experience. Even the soul and the spirit, and here we take up Plotinus again, must be known through experience, neither more nor less than perceptible things, and as Whichcote's point, the rational is not opposed to the spiritual; they are aspects of that one reality which is always poured forth in to the mind of the good man so as to transport him 'from strength to strength', as John Smith said, 'from glory to glory'.

Hobbes and the Cambridge Platonists. The difference between the Cambridge Platonists theories and those of Hobbes, widely known at the time, could be considered useful to better focus the philosophical peculiarity of Cambridge Platonists. Patrides' analysis is accurate: 'Hobbes was a naturalist, they were idealist. He posited a universe permeated by matter, they believed in a world palpitating with spirit. He postulated determinism in a mechanical universe obedient to inflexible laws, they asserted man to be a free agent within a vital, dynamic, 'plastic' nature. He was never conscious of the transcendental, they were never without 'the delicious sense of Divine'. He implicitly denied the divine origin of the man, they explicitly upheld it. He located the ultimate authority in the sovereign, they placed in the mind of man, 'the candle of the Lord'. He claimed that man is motivated by fear, they asserted that man is instinct of love.'(6)

The Idea of God. Cambridge Neo-platonic thought came to what in my view was a hugely important turning point: the transformation of the idea of God and, consequently, of the concept of religiosity. The return of the Cambridge Platonists to the ancient and wisest philosophers, as also the primitive fathers, the Greek especially, was a return to a tradition which included many more philosophers besides Plato, the Neoplatonists, the Greek Fathers, and the thinkers of fifteenth-century Florence. This tradition was rooted in 'the primitive theology of the Gentiles' which according to Ficino had begun with Zoroaster or perhaps with the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, had passed thence to Orpheus and Pythagoras and several others, and had at last found its way 'entire' into book of 'our Plato'. As a matter of fact, the Cambridge religious concept does not stop at Christianity, with even Whichcote declaring that 'the good nature of a heathen is more God-like than the furious zeal of a Christian'. Thus they champion their ecumenical idea of religion, which is the same as that professed by Freemasonry.

When searching for thinkers who might be taken as reference points, one sometimes fails to notice that authors are mentioned whose doctrines are often in absolute contrast to one another. The choice of Florentine Neo-Platonism and its Anglo-Saxon continuation, represented by the Cambridge Neo-Platonists, is intended not only as a quest for that philosophy which best suits Masonic thought, but also as a quest for that philosophy which does not conflict with various religious expressions and especially with Christian religious expression (in light of secular disputes between the Church and Freemasonry). To associate thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino with other thinkers, such as Giordano Bruno for example, is, in my view, not only simplistic but also misleading. The antithesis is particularly evident in the concept of Eros, the core of Neo-platonic thought. The platonic theory of love, which the Florence Academy had sought to unite with Christianity, was in fact to be twisted by Giordano Bruno, who sees in Eros proof of the colossal force of man. It is Eros which equips man with that 'heroic fury' which enables him to have a vision of the infinite universe and to break the ties which link it to religion. So, if Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino never look for conflict with Christian theology, seeking to let platonic concepts coexist with Christian theology, in Bruno, on the contrary, the platonic concept of Eros becomes an out and out weapon against Christian doctrine. The Italian Neo-Platonists, contrary to Bruno, set out as guardians of a tradition which they absolutely do not want to demolish, but to preserve.

It must also be said that if in Italy the alliance between Humanism and the Church seems to reach its climax with the election of Enea Silvio Piccolomini as Pope (Pius II), it is also true that this association was often resolved in the humanists' attempt to influence religion which they at times regarded with scepticism.

In England, on the other hand, the connection between Humanism and religion is established on different grounds, and when Humanism criticises the antiquated systems of theological erudition, such criticism is always constructive, it is for the good of religion, and does not aim to destabilize it. The influence of Italian Neo-Platonism is clear, one need only think of the esteem in which a great thinker such as Thomas Moore held Pico della Mirandola, whom he considered a paragon of life. But above all, the influence of Neo-Platonism was felt in such a way that English thinkers could shake off the ecclesiastic tradition and confront the true 'universal fundamentals', the 'a priori' of religion. It is here where the work of the Cambridge Platonists comes in, which by means of the platonic concept of 'a-priority', was to be compared to the orthodox ecclesiastical system and to the up-and-coming empiricism.

In the English society of the sixteenth century, the Neo-platonic concept of a religion free from dogma reaches its peak with Thomas Moore's 'Utopia', the greatest expression of platonic doctrine and Plotinus's doctrine of Eros and Beauty, and with the works of Spencer ('The Faerie Queene' and the 'Hymnes to Love and Heavenly Beautie') which allowed platonic ideas to reach their greatest poetic expression of the time. But it is particularly with the Cambridge School that Platonism would have, in another historical context and in a different spiritual environment, the same function as it had carried out two centuries previously in the Italian Rinascimento, that is, it would bring about a recurrence of the problem of freedom from dogma, the problem of ethics and the problem of religion.

The independence of Ethics from Politics and Religion. The theories of the Cambridge Neo-Platonists were to find their final interpreter in Shaftesbury, who, in a climate dominated by the heated disputes at the end of the seventeenth century regarding ethics, morals and religion, maintains the independence of morals from religion and politics, recognising therein the foundation in the sentiment or in the 'moral consciousness'. This can only force us to make the connection with the cornerstone of the Anglo-Saxon Masonic tradition, the exclusion from engaging in politics and religion, which may be interpreted as the embodiment of this intention to not impugn ethics and morals, at the heart of Lodge work, with arguments from which ethics itself must be kept separate. For Shaftesbury, it is from this 'moral consciousness' that one must set out in order to reach that immediate and inner perception of good and evil, of right and wrong. So the possibility of acting according to the categories of ethics is based upon a mutual sense of order and harmony, in an alliance of ethical and aesthetic sentiment, in accordance with that union of beauty and goodness, just as in platonism, and in my view, Masonic tradition.

If, by way of conclusion, one cannot, in the light of this study, actually speak of the existence of a 'Masonic philosophy', intended as an organized system of true Masonic thought, one can still lay claim to the existence of a philosophical influence, of Neo-platonic origin, on the birth of modern Freemasonry. The Cambridge Neo-Platonists, whose theories were seen by contemporaries as obsolete and unable to resolve the new problems of the day, got their revenge in a sense with their thought still being alive in the principles of Freemasonry, more topical than ever and necessary to stem the profusion of technicality and relativism in the society in which we live.

Note: Pagination refers to the Italian version. Page references to the English translation are given in brackets afterwards.

- 1) Ernst Cassirer, *La rinascenza platonica in Inghilterra e la Scuola di Cambridge*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1968, pag.1. Original title: *Die Platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge*, 1932. English translation: *The Platonic renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove, 1953. pg. 8
- 2) H.More, *Poems*, pg.409
- 3) C.A.Patrides, *The Cambridge Platonists*, Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachussets, 1970, pg.35
- 4) C.A.Patrides, *Ibidem*, pag.4-5
- 5) Cassirer, *Ibidem*, pg. 51
- 6) C.A.Patrides, *Ibidem*, pag.6.

Cudworth(1617-1685) Theoretical founder of the Cambridge School – The true intellectual system of the universe (Confutation of Atheism)
Henry More(1614-1687)
Benjamin Whichcote(1609-1683)
John Smith(1616-1652)
Nathaniel Culverel(1618-1651)