

REVOLUTION AND CONTINUITY IN PHILOSOPHY: “MEDIEVALISM” AND “MODERNITY”

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SÍNTESE – Este artigo revisa a idéia de filosofia “medieval” and põe ênfase na variedade de significados daquela palavra. O autor crê que necessitamos de uma nova terminologia para aquele período da história do pensamento e sugere, por razões históricas, as expressões “United Age” e “Formation Age”. Em todo o artigo prevalece uma tentativa de compreender a natureza da atividade filosófica e da história da filosofia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Diferentes acepções da palavra “medieval”. “United Age”. “Formation Age”. Modos de entender a história da filosofia.

ABSTRACT – This article reviews the very idea of “medieval” philosophy and puts emphasis in the variety of meanings of that word. The author thinks we are in need of a new terminology for that period of the history of thought and suggests for historical reasons the expressions “United Age” and also “Formation Age”. In the whole article prevails an attempt to understand the nature of philosophical realization and history of philosophy.

KEY WORDS – Different accounts of the word “medieval”. “United Age”. “Formation Age”. Ways of understanding the history of philosophy.

1 Does the so-called “Medieval” Philosophy exist?

There are *so many different views* of the so-called “Medieval” Philosophy, that *its very existence, or at least the meaningfulness of such a denomination, is questionable*. Often enough we hear people and even philosophy scholars talking about “Medieval” Philosophy in such a way, that any similarity with reality is just a sheer coincidence. This series of *vulgar commonplaces* being “Medieval” Philosophy, we are entitled to wonder whether “Medieval” Philosophy has ever existed beyond the imagination of some polemicists who succeeded in imposing their simplicities.

1.1 A respectful terminology

Inertia is too strong a law in historiography. Every “medievalist” is aware of the unfairness of the name of his speciality. But he can only try to present a different outlook to those willing to study that millenium critically and directly so that

they overcome their mental inertia and false prejudices. Anyhow, the custom and the resignation regarding the "consecrated" name dissuade from attempting another nomenclature. Yet denominations are very strategical and especially significant for those who are not ready to study consistently. Therefore, *it is of the utmost importance to create a new agreement for a terminology that may be respectful towards every period of human history and thought.*

Giovanni Andrea dei Bussi, bishop of Aleria, was the first to write "media tempestas" in 1469. In "Batavia" by Adriano Junius (1588) we read about the "scriptores mediae aetatis". But the definitive spreading of the term begins with Christopher Keller (Celarius), only in the XVII century. The term and the connected scornful valuation got their consolidation through Hegel, who could not boast of a great knowledge about those centuries. With regard to this opinion the German idealist was not representative at all of the Romanticism, a movement which appreciated that millenium courageously, though rather in virtue of sentimental grounds. No period of human history should be idealized, but certainly every historical period, its culture and its persons, must be respected in its true identity and in its good name. The terminological manipulation being faced is not so difficult to trace back and to reply, as we have seen. There were several antecedents in the Italian Renaissance and in the protestant Reform, but the real and definitive attack pertained to the Enlightenment (XVIII) and its context. In our century the pretension of this current of being the unique authorized representant of rationality has been abundantly criticized. Well then, neither for the sake of any sentimentalism nor for whatever theological and apologetic motivation are we offering a term as well as a view differing from the enlightened establishment. It is for the sake of historiographic fairness and above all of *an open and richer rationality.* This is most significant for history of philosophy and philosophy itself.

In philosophy the problem is particularly serious. Both ignorance and contempt against the "Middle Ages" in general are very spread even today. However, some of its cultural aspects, like art, have been quite recovered, unlike its philosophy, whose identity itself as such is often devaluated or even denied on account of its "dependence" on a "non scientific" subject called theology.

Our proposal, which can be by all means discussed, is *United Age*, referred to those centuries between the fall of Western Roman Empire (V) and the settlement of the nationalist and authoritarian States (XV). It is tremendously complex to choose a general character suitable for a long millenium of very different realities as well as for the various sensitivities of scholars. Anyhow, almost every new denomination would be better or less bad than the older one, whose sole "advantage" is just inertia. And indeed our period as a whole was a time of a prevalence of the universal, popular, communitarian and unitarian tendencies and achievements. At least in comparative terms. The ancient time is well known as the classic one, because it laid the foundations, the basic models, of our so-called "western civilization", but its direct and deep influence was centred in the Mediterranean area, and a large part of Europe was hardly involved. During the most creative time, the classic Greek one, the number of peoples and of cultural sources and

the geographic extension were quite reduced. The entrance of all the peoples and tribes into the history of our culture took place only along the period that we are calling "United Age". Its remarkable and defining activity of unification was rooted directly in Antiquity, i. e., both in the Greek-Roman legacy and in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, without disregarding the Islamic contribution. Let us say: in the Socratic and in the Abrahamic heritages. But the unification or synthesis of these different heritages, apparently very opposite, and of the great number of tribes and peoples was a most creative and patient labor. That is why the United Age can be also called *Formation Age*, regarding the formation of what we are, of what we modernly are today. Greece, Rome and the Profetic and Apostolic Preaching are the seed, the conception. The United Age is the maturation, the main construction. The rest are varied developments, more or less coherent with our origins, of what we basically are, as long as we keep our civilizatory identity. This dynamic and growing unification did not lack of some divisions and contradictory currents like any human reality, but the joint result was eminently unitarian. Our contemporary trials of reunification have as main grounds that solid and monumental union. Central elements of it were: the common language, latin; the ideal of a new christian and roman empire or community; the catholic faith and morals; the cosmopolitan universities; the routes of trade and pilgrimage; the successive predominant styles of art and the cultural and evangelizing labor of the network of monasteries. Afterwards different kinds of individualist, nationalist and pluralist trends have been prevailing. Even then the national identity was based on elements like a language created in the United Age, and the individualist and pluralist consciousness is rooted in the patristic and unitarian discovery of the value and intimacy of the person. We do not mean at all a reduction of the peculiar creativity in our modern times, which is enormous in many aspects. We just mean that *our modern creativity does not come out of nothing, with only some vague and far-away ancient antecedents*, and that a proper name for the period of the formation of our culture is "United Age". Our thesis is that *history of philosophy, as history of science and history in general, is a dialectic or tensional combination of continuation and revolution, of unification and pluralism*.

We also need a proper terminology for the periods and schools of philosophy which are usually involved. Here we do not need to innovate so much as before. We just need not to confuse different streams and to avoid too general and propagandist denominations. *Patristic* thinkers are the first to be distinguished from the unitarian or "medieval" ones. In philosophy Patrology is often enough reduced to the posterior period, but, as it will be explained, they have their own coordinates. It would be too general to talk only about "medieval" or unitarian philosophy. At least we have to recognize *Arabic*, *Jewish*, *Prescholastic* (VI-X) and *Scholastic* (high, classic and low scholastic) philosophers. Several centuries after the end of the United Age no philosopher can be designed simply as scholastic, specially if the philosopher is a quite creative one. Therefore, we have to distinguish *Modern Scholastic* (XV-XVIII) and *Neoscholastic* (XIX-XX). Next, we face another unfair inertia in the term "Modern" as applied exclusively to certain groups of philoso-

phers. The problem does not rest on the excessive generalization, but on the exclusiveness of such an attractive adjective, which exclude other modern philosophers from modernity, like modern Scholastics. Since the so-called par excellence "modern philosophers", namely rationalists, empirists, Kant and German idealists, do share their basic epistemological principle, the principle of immanence, they can be well recognized as *Immanentists*. Unfortunately, there is still a meager awareness about this common principle among philosophers. Finally, to speak about "Renaissance philosophers" implies to accept plainly the term "Renaissance" as exclusive of the cultural movement appeared among Italian humanists in XIV and XV centuries, and consequently to consider the United Age as a long dead period without its own renaissances. Thus, let us prefer to talk about *Italian Humanists* or simply about *Humanists*, for, although Humanists have always existed, this term does not entail a disregard for another period.

1.2 *General contradictions about facts*

Once we have discussed the terminology suitable for a well-founded approach to the reality of the Unity Age and its philosophy, let us focus on some general contradictions centred not so much on terms as on facts, though these contradictions have already been introduced. We are going to deal with two tendencies, namely antimedievalism and medievalism.

Antimedievalism is the generalized cluster of assumptions with very weak foundations, but firmly believed even by quite learned people. According to it the "Middle Ages" is a uniform, dark and regressive epoch, which deserves nothing but to be forgotten. To a certain extent it was understandable that some Italian Humanists showed a particular scorn towards an immediate former period in order to enhance their own identity and value. But after a calm analysis of what that period was and of what we are, the arrogant position imposed by the Enlightenment is no longer tenable. Besides, a common front of the "Renaissance" and the Enlightenment is imaginary, inasmuch as the Enlightenment did not appreciated positively in the "Renaissance" either science or philosophy, the two significant domains for the Enlightened. In general, the Enlightenment, whose objective merits cannot be denied, disregarded the past, any tradition. And after the denial of any substantial contribution attributed to the United Age and to Patrology there is only a series of venerable ancient thinkers separated from us by an oceanic gap of around two thousand years (or longer if late ancient pagan authors are rejected too). Hence, in practical terms, the really meaningful history of philosophy, if not history globally considered, begins with the Immanentists and the Enlightened Philosophers in XVIII century. To have a correct perspective of Unitarian Philosophy and its time is not only necessary for understanding those particular thinkers, but also for having a sound outlook of the train of the general history of philosophy, of what is truly revolutionary or permanent.

Medievalism is paradoxically supported by some specialists in that period. It is not such a confusing tendency as its opposing extreme, Antimedievalism. While

this position regards the millenium as practically non existing, as uninteresting or irrelevant, medievalists extend the characterization of "medieval" to much earlier philosophers (Patrology) as well as to much later ones (Modern Scholastics). With opposite intentions both extreme tendencies arrive at a similar exaggerated scope for Unitarian Philosophy. But even from a first survey this view is contrary to the historical dialectic of mutual influence between epoch and thought, in spite of the cases of pioneers or anachronists. Moreover, it is short-sighted not to recognize the very rich and peculiar contribution of every philosophical period. A fine example of medievalism is offered by Juan Fernando Ortega Muñoz ("Filosofía Medieval y Filosofía de la Edad Media", in *Philosophica Malacitana*, vol. V, 1992, pp.117-127). Firstly, all the main features, quoted by him and by others and which would make Patrology and Modern Scholastics to be "medieval", are simply Judaeo-Christian background. Secondly, it is anachronical to name a period after a later one. It is rather the original one that gives its name to the following one. Thirdly, if an author like Suárez (XVI-XVII) has to be "medieval" because of his remarkable agreement with classic scholastic doctrines, he should be equally an ancient Greek on account of his vigorous aristotelism. In addition to be wrong and confusing, the extension of "medieval" is most unfitting in virtue of the bad reputation of this adjective.

2 Continuity and Revolution in Philosophy

2.1 Time and Philosophy

As we have above stated, we consider history of philosophy to be a *surprising and never mechanical dialectic of continuity and revolution*.

On the one hand, *it is impossible to build a system of thought* (more or less coherently and explicitly every thinking is systematic) *by innovating absolutely everything*, when so many centuries-old cultural and traditional factors are deeply involved. And, as a matter of fact, we find *some basic doctrines over and over again all through the centuries* in any position to be examined. Let us say, for instance, that epistemologically speaking Suárez resembles St.Thomas less than Hume resembles Ockham, which obviously is not enough to classify Hume among the "medievals". Concerning our period, a total novelty of "modern" philosophy turns out untenable.

On the other hand, *it is also inconceivable a fully static thinking*, as it is often attributed to Patrology and to any sort of scholastic thought, even though several of their authors are some of the most revolutionary ones in human history. Whenever we try to follow an author or a school, we change somehow the original thinking through our interpretation. This is especially true when a current of thinking spread over many centuries, different geographic areas and social situations. But even within a certain shool there is always some change and approximately the typical course of the life-time of a great cultural or philosophical movement can be described from its initial trials up to its dissolution.

Of course there are some particular authors who do not fit perfectly in their own time, in the normal change of times. It is also true that philosophy possesses a certain autonomy from the general train of historical events. All the same, *the reciprocal influence of historical time and philosophical thinking is undeniable*. Then we can apply a specific theory of philosophy of science to history of philosophy: Popper's "falsation", Kuhn's scientific paradigm and revolution, Feyerabend's methodological anarchism or whatever is more cogent for us. What is basically in discussion in those theories, is the prevalence of intrinsic and objective reasons either to keep or to change a scientific model or the predominance of external and subjective reasons. Similarly psychologists like Piaget and Vigosky have discussed whether the main factors in learning pertain to cognitive process of the subject or to social environment. In any event, a sound conclusion would admit the relevant rôle of both of them.

2.2 *Eternity and Philosophy: Radical Christian Novelty*

Continuity and revolution in the history of philosophy take place within the interaction between various temporal factors and philosophical initiative itself. Now we wonder *how do the experience and the conception regarding eternity affect the historical train of philosophy?* We approach that question by focusing on what is especially important for our topic. Accordingly we survey the fundamental contributions of the Christian message in the history of philosophy.

In metaphysics and cosmology the Judaeo-Christian tradition introduces the conception of God as full *Absoluteness*. From this starting point every good quality becomes absolute: omnipotence, omniscience, absolute goodness, absolute freedom, absolute unity, absolute existence. Absoluteness admits no peer and, consequently, the rest of entities depends absolutely on the Absolute Being: that is *Creation*, a continuous and revolutionary act of creation out of nothing. Thus, a fundamental tension arises between God's absolute transcendence and God's creative omnipresence, which degenerates neither into pantheism nor into an image of a distant God. Jesús de Garay ("*La novedad de la filosofía medieval*", *Actas del Primer Congreso Nacional de Filosofía Medieval*, Zaragoza, 1992, 305-314) upholds that a deeper sense of freedom in general and of God's freedom particularly is the great novelty of "medieval" thought in contrast to Antiquity and takes for granted that Patrology is a part of "medieval" philosophy. But that profound sense of freedom, first of all God's and consequently man's and history's, is simply Judaeo-Christian and, therefore, patristic and unitarian authors developed it. Anyhow, the greatest manifestation of omnipotence and freedom is Incarnation, where the recreation and the divinization or absolutization of the created world has begun: paradoxically God is so absolute, that He can unite himself in an essential and personal mode to relative entities without losing his absoluteness. Because of that the Christian concept of God is at the same time more purely absolute or transcendent and closer and more intimate than the Jewish one.

Regarding ethics and the concept of human history and life, the Christian principal contribution is the radical conception of *Love*: God's essence itself, God's plan for us and final goal for the whole creation. God's love implies *Providence: history is free for progress* instead of being closed in an eternal return. Love itself is the authentic experience of freedom.

In anthropological and individual terms the radical Christian novelty is the notion and the appreciation of *the Person* as such, because of her intrinsic dignity, regardless of her particular utility. Since we are created in the own image and likeness of a personal, free and living God, we are also free persons with dignity and called to an abundant life. As God is unique and communitarian (trinitarian), we are unique and communitarian persons too. We are even the most personal creation of God, inasmuch as our souls are directly God's creations. To help a poor man is to help God himself and to kill any human person is equivalent to deicide. That is Christ's solidarity.

Whoever takes over one or some of this deep conceptions, may be influenced by the Christian cosmovision, but is not necessarily a "medieval" thinker and not even a Judaeo-Christian author. On the contrary, all the so-called "modern" philosophers would be "medieval".

2.3 "Ancilla" or "Domina"?

One of the most widespread mistaken notions is that philosophy was simply "ancilla theologiae" during the "Middle Ages", whence one could hardly speak about a real and free philosophy.

It is true that many unitarian philosophers were at the same time great theologians, but precisely because of that they were most interested themselves in *distinguishing sharply confessional theology and plain philosophy*. There were outstanding streams and authors who emphasized extremely the independence of philosophy from theology, like the Dialectics, the Latin Averroists or Ockham himself. In any case, even when thinkers like S. Peter Damian upheld a helpful and respectful attitude of human understanding towards Revelation, chiefly by doing exegesis, they meant that principle *for the domain of sacred theology*. This is wholly reasonable. Every science or discipline keeps its method and autonomy. And, in general, truth was not expected to be contradictory among the diverse sciences, except for the Latin Averroists. On the one hand, sometimes a philosophical theory was questioned if it was in strong opposition to a central theological conviction. That could also happen between philosophy and any other science. On the other hand, even a central theological conviction could be expressed in a remarkably different way if it appeared to be formulated in irrational or contradictory terms. Revelation can never be replaced by reason, but *theology is not entitled at all to contradict reason or philosophy*: theology is a reasonable understanding of Revelation. Rightly or wrongly, there has never been a theology more systematically developed in rational terms than the Catholic one, as much as to exasperate its opponents. The question of acceptability put aside, would Kant claim to go

further with reason than St.Thomas?. Are Nietzsche's basic assumptions better proved than those of Maimonides, Averroes or Peter Abelard?. Was not the German thinker a "sui generis" theologian?.

All the same, the frequent patristic and unitarian connections between one of the three monoteistic and revealed theologies and a philosophy rooted in Greece are not an exceptional fact or something to be deplored. Here our thesis is *that every period of history of philosophy has been somehow attached to a particular concern and preconception*. A "pure" philosophy does not exist.

Generally speaking, *Greece presumed eternity and, therefore, perfect necessity in nature*. There was not much room for deep human freedom. God was not perfectly absolute, since at least he could not create out of nothing. They were following a very simple and imaginative general grasp on nature, just emancipated from a mythological mentality.

Patrology, including its precursor Philo of Alexandria, was involved in *the dialogue and controversies between initial Christian Tradition in search of self-understanding and late pagan Hellenistic thinking in search of survival*, though Christian thinkers looked for and preferred classical Greek sources. Autonomous philosophical developments were more visible in works by *Prescholastics and Scholastics*, whose *new principal interlocutor was no longer a pagan, but the two other monotheistic cosmovisions*. Nevertheless, both Patristic and Scholastic authors recognized eternity in a really absolute and transcendental God, so as to set nature and especially mankind free from an internal and blind necessity, but without turning the world adrift, with no Providence. Among Scholastics, however, there were more differences in this crucial point. The leading stream did learn from the Greek autonomy and rational order of nature, and admitted it to a good extent. They, authors like St. Albert Magnus, were called "intellectualists" by their opponents. The other stream, whose best representant is Ockham, just emphasized unilaterally God's free will up to deny any consistency to the world. This can be considered an extremism of a Christian novelty, but also a similar scheme to the platonic dualism, where the sensible and human realm had a very little and dependent reality.

Patristic as well as Scholastic Philosophers were Christian, usually theologians too, and followed mainly Plato, Aristotle and Stoicism, but there are several highlights distinguishing clearly both groups.