

The Neo-Averroistic Foundation of the Contemporary

Western Understanding of Tolerance

The title of my paper today is “The Neo-Averroistic Foundation of the Contemporary Western Understanding of Tolerance.” By “the Contemporary Western Understanding of Tolerance” I mean a conception of tolerance that tends to dominate contemporary Westerners and tends to transcend political affiliations today. Westerners across all ages and backgrounds today have a proclivity to accept this notion of tolerance as easily as we have a proclivity to assume the terms “science” and “positivistic science,” or “mathematical physics,” are identical.

This present-day understanding radically differs from the way traditional theologians like Sts. Aurelius Augustine and Thomas Aquinas understood tolerance—as a property of justice that inclines a person to endure the existence of a smaller evil so as to prevent the existence of a greater evil. Instead, the contemporary conception (1) reduces the whole of justice to tolerance (which it often refers to simply as “social justice”); (2) understands tolerance to be psychological receptivity toward approving increasingly different kinds of personal and social human behavior; and (3) chiefly understands tolerance (and, with it, justice) to be a metaphysical, epistemological, historical, and hermeneutical (not a moral) principle: a tool for correctly reading history, rightly behaving morally and politically, and becoming and being scientific.

A main purpose of this paper is to propose a thesis about how the historical transition from the classical to the contemporary understanding of tolerance occurred. To start defending this thesis I maintain that (1) the peculiar proclivity of Westerners to understand tolerance and science the way we do is no accident; and (2) wittingly or

unwittingly, for centuries, the prevailing Western understanding of tolerance has been used to generate, promote, and now sustain the contemporary Western presumption that science and empirical science are identical.

To give credibility to the above two claims, I call upon experiences that I think most any Western philosophy professor is likely to have had. Ask virtually any Western college student today the question, “What is truth?” and the student will tend to reply: “A fact,” or “What is factual.” Follow with the question, “What is a fact?”, and the same student will tend to answer, “What can be proven.” Ask, “What does the word ‘proof’ mean?” and the student will tend to say: “What can be scientifically, or experimentally, tested.”

Among other things, evident about such replies is the tendency that contemporary Western college students have to rule out what is evident and many traditional subjects of scientific study from possessing truth. The mind of the contemporary Western college student tends to reduce the whole of truth to positivism. Apart from accepting truth to exist in positivistic science, the contemporary Western college student tends to be an absolute skeptic.

Historically considered, we can easily trace this sort of reductionism to many Western intellectuals, including Immanuel Kant. Well known to many students of the Enlightenment is that, to make room for faith, Kant sought to reduce science to mathematical physics.¹ In doing so, in the face of the threat of David Hume, Kant was simply attempting to continue a project that was part of the great dream of modern philosophy’s father, René Descartes, to conceive of science as a system of clear and distinct ideas. As Étienne Gilson tells us, Descartes’s grand project consisted in knowing

everything by one method with the same amount of certainty or knowing nothing at all.² Hence, long before Kant, Descartes had reduced truth to science and was condemned either to possess the whole of science or no truth at all.

Before Kant, too, some Western intellectuals had started to realize that, at least in part, Descartes's project had been a failure. Chief among them, perhaps, was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau realized that the success of Descartes's dream to join all our ideas into a unified scientific body of knowledge depended upon overcoming a weakness in Descartes's system.

As is well known, Descartes had attempted to construct his scientific system by maintaining that only two substances exist, mind and matter, and that they cannot communicate. Descartes considered matter to be totally inactive and mind, or spirit, to be only thing that acts. Rousseau recognized that, in the real world, matter and mind communicate. Since Descartes could not explain this communication between the substances of mind, or spirit, and matter, Rousseau resigned to overcome this failure by accepting a position that Descartes had rejected: "modern philosophy's principles are essentially dualistic, animistic, and obscure."³ Hence, Rousseau maintained, "only spirits are substances." He thought that only spirits exist and even "apparently inanimate beings, like stones, are animate."⁴

While Rousseau accepted Descartes's claim that science is a system of clear and distinct ideas, he rejected Descartes's contention that God had given us this system simultaneously whole in a multitude of clear and distinct ideas buried in our mind. Instead, Rousseau maintained that, under the influence of the "voice of conscience," or tolerance," God has intended this system of science to emerge from the human race

through progressive self-development [what we, today, call “progress”]. And, in this process, in his classic work entitled *Emile or On Education*, Rousseau claimed that God intends humanity’s true teacher to be a person of inspired, or enlightened, faith, the singular person of strong feeling who has only nature as a teacher.⁵

Prior to Rousseau, Sir Isaac Newton had also rejected Descartes’s understanding of science as a system of clear and distinct ideas buried in his soul. Instead, Newton had claimed science, which he identified with philosophy, to be to be deflated theology, historical truth about God’s operation in creation.⁶

Newton looked upon the whole universe and its parts as a riddle, a secret, that he could read by applying pure thought to the world around him, “certain mythic clues which God had left about the world to allow a sort of philosopher’s treasure hunt to the esoteric brotherhood.” He believed that a secret brotherhood had transmitted these truths, this hidden teaching, about the nature of universe in an unbroken chain back to the original cryptic revelation in Babylonia.⁷

Beyond these things, Newton thought that, “throughout history, God continuously raised up prophets to lead his people back to the original truth revealed to the first followers of Jesus.”⁸ He believed he was one of these prophets, a Magi “descended from a long line of scientific prophets who had anticipated his discoveries in a prefigured and oracular fashion.” Apparently, he saw his birth on 25 December 1642 as a sign of his special relation to the Magi.⁹

In a fashion similar to many Renaissance humanists and to the Medieval Islamic thinker Averroes, Newton believed that Scripture hides a true teaching, philosophy, or science. But, according to Newton, this teaching is about the history of creation, the

original Christian religion, not a mystical and esoteric moral or metaphysical system (as many Renaissance humanists thought). In standard Renaissance humanist fashion, Newton maintained that the educational deficiency of their audience had caused Moses and other Biblical authors to describe this creation history poetically, to make it comprehensible.¹⁰

I have argued elsewhere that, despite claims by Gilson to the contrary, precisely speaking, Descartes did not move the West from the skepticism of Montaigne to a new philosophy. Precisely speaking, Descartes moved the West from the predominance of one branch of the classical liberal arts, the *trivium* (the poetry and rhetoric of Renaissance humanism) to another, the *quadrivium*.¹¹ Strictly speaking, Descartes did not generate a new philosophy or a return to constructive philosophical thinking. He wedded together a new rhetoric and poetic view of the world in which mathematical abstraction united to a new logic of invention, not the rhetoric and poetic view of the world that had dominated Renaissance humanism, would prevail as the primary means by which Westerners would, from that point on, read the Book of Nature.¹²

In doing this, I maintain that Descartes (1) was doing little more than making an attempted correction in the more major political revolution initiated centuries before him by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) and (2), under the rubric of the *quadrivium*, was involving himself in a poetic and rhetorical continuation of the age-old battle between poets and philosophers that Plato had described in Book 10 of his famous *Republic*. Under the rubric of the “Battle of the Arts” this battle had resurfaced during the twelfth century between faculty members of the Cathedral school of Chartres and the monastery of St. Victor in Paris; in the thirteenth century between members of the faculties of arts

and theology at the University of Paris; and during the Renaissance with Petrarch and his Renaissance humanist followers.

Part of the thesis of this paper is that we get a more accurate understanding of Descartes' scientific project if we see it as a continuation of the Renaissance humanist movement, if we see Descartes not as coming out of, or continuing, the Western philosophical tradition, but as coming out of and continuing the Renaissance humanist tradition. Once we do this we become better able to understand the modern and contemporary ages as a whole and to recognize the truth of a startling statement that Gilson makes in his classic, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. There he tells any historian who might investigate the sources of "modern rationalism" that an uninterrupted chain of influence exists from the Averroistic tradition of the Masters of Arts of Paris to the European freethinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹³

Clearly, this neo-Averroistic tendency is present within much of the Renaissance humanist movement. It is clearly present in Newton. I maintain that it is equally present in Descartes' claim that philosophy, or science, is a hidden system buried in his soul like in a book that only he, or someone who imitates his method, can read.

During the twelfth century, Averroes had constructed a sophistic argument to safeguard the rights and freedom of philosophy against intrusion by theologians and others and to protect Islam against heresies that a weak understanding of philosophy is prone to generate. This sophistic argument consisted of distinguishing three categories of human minds and three corresponding degrees and limits of human understanding, learning, and teaching "of one single and same truth": (1) the most true and abstract scientific mind of the philosopher, which supposedly apprehends, learns, and teaches this

truth in an absolute sense in its hidden, interior meaning, through demonstrative reasoning “from the necessary to the necessary by the necessary”; (2) the less true and symbolic unscientific mind of the logician, and theologian, which grasps this truth in its exterior, imaginative, symbolic meaning, through logical interpretation and probability; and (3) the simple religious and believing mind, which apprehends this one and same truth through the imagination, emotions, and oratorical arguments.

Gilson explains that, while Averroes claimed, “the Koran is truth itself,” he maintained that the Koran “has an exterior and symbolic meaning for the uninstructed, an interior and hidden meaning for scholars.” He considered revelation’s true meaning to be its most lofty meaning. Its most lofty meaning, however, was its philosophical, or scientific, meaning.

Averroes thought that philosophical truth is “the highest type of human truth.” This means that, for Averroes: (1) human truth is the highest type of Koranic truth, (2) the highest type of human truth is philosophy, or science, (3) philosophical, or scientific, truth is present in a hidden fashion in the Koran, and (4) only philosophers can recognize it!

Unhappily for subsequent philosophical history, I maintain that (1) Petrarch took and adapted Averroes’s division of human minds by designing his own program and method for harmonizing religion and philosophy and a new, fabricated interpretation of philosophy’s history to support it: (2) *mutatis mutandis*, Descartes unwittingly adopted Petrarch’s program and method, and a new interpretation of philosophy to support it; and (3) *mutatis mutandis*, to correct weaknesses in Descartes’s system, by introducing his own trinitarian hierarchy of three categories of human minds and limits of human

understanding, Rousseau accepted and modified the program and method of Descartes and Petrarch, and a new interpretation of philosophy to support it..

In Petrarch's program a new mind and profession replaced the trinitarian hierarchy of Averroes. In Petrarch's scheme, the highest form of human mind is that of theologizing poets (*poetae theologisantes*), not the mind of philosophers. As a complement of this new mind in the order of teaching and learning, Petrarch created a new profession of poetry that combines the techniques of rhetoric, poetry, and theology: *theologia poetica* (poetic theology).

In short, Petrarch appears simply to have attempted to use dialectical arguments to defeat the claims of Averroes. He accepted the truth of Averroes's premise that the whole of truth is a hidden teaching, or body of knowledge, but he sought to drive Averroes's teaching into opposite and an unwelcome conclusion by claiming that that this truth is contained in the Book of Nature, which only the theologizing poet, not the philosopher, had the capacity to read.

In attempting to reform Descartes' view of systematic science, Rousseau shakes hands across the centuries with Petrarch and Averroes by using an analogous sort of dialectical argument against Descartes. Descartes had reformed Petrarch's teaching by claiming that the whole of science exists completely within the human mind as a system of clear and distinct ideas; but only a person of exceptionable ability, like Descartes, could recognize it. Recognizing that Descartes could not explain how mind and matter interact, Rousseau attempted to solve this problem by getting rid of Descartes's notion of matter and of Descartes's claims that, through application of simple Cartesian doubt, we

find the system of science whole and complete in our minds and that only the Cartesian can mind can read it.

To effect his goal, Rousseau (1) reduced matter to spirit and (2) conceived Descartes's scientific system of clear and distinct ideas as initially obscure but spiritually and historically emerging, in a neo-Averroistic mental trinity, through the ideas of tolerance, progress, and the voice of conscience. For Rousseau scientific truth historically evolves, is the evolution of historical consciousness, and only the Enlightened, tolerant mind can read this history.

While Rousseau accepted Descartes's claim that science is a system of clear and distinct ideas, Rousseau rejected Descartes's contention that God had buried this system in our minds simultaneously whole in the present. Instead, Rousseau maintained that God has intended this system of science to emerge from the human race, under the influence of the voice of conscience, or tolerance, through progressive self-development (what we, today, tend to call "progress").

Rousseau maintained that conscience is a way of speaking: an oracle, or *voice*, produced as a result of a system of human emotions (sensations of the self as a body) feeling themselves together, emerging, into a system of other, self-disclosed, individual emotions (the idea of self as spirit). Union of these two systems of emotion generates the voice we call "conscience": a voice that moves us to transport ourselves from one system into another, from a child of mechanical instinct to a moral agent, to a civic being. For Rousseau, the voice of conscience is God's voice, free speech, an act of disclosure whereby the system of nature transports itself (human nature), according to a neo-Averroistic mental trinity, beyond a more primitive mechanical system to a social and,

finally, political system. Conscience does this by changing the way we talk (just as a male's voice changes as he enters adolescence) as we move from the lower stage to the higher.

At the mechanical stage of human instinct, which corresponds to Averroes's totally imaginative and emotional level of the ordinary believer, persuaded only by oratorical arguments, Rousseau thinks that God's voice (conscience) speaks through the mechanical voice of human instinct, human nature viewed as a dumb animal, or machine. At the moral stage of educational development, which corresponds to Averroes's second stage of symbolic mind of the logician and theologian, God's voice still speaks through the book of nature. But the book of nature is humanity emerged toward the first, primitive stage of Enlightenment reason, not the book of mechanical human instinct. At this point, the system of enlightened ideas enables God for the first time in human history, to utter his voice, and make it heard by the human spirit, not just by the body. That is, human beings get a taste of spirit, of freedom!

Conscience in the proper sense cannot exist prior to the existence of knowledge and reason, the civic stage of complete Enlightenment. This corresponds to Averroes's most true and abstract mind of the philosopher, which apprehends, learns, and teaches truth in an absolute sense in its hidden, interior meaning, through scientific demonstration. Before humanity reaches this stage, Rousseau holds that what we call "conscience" is a primitive, mechanical-like groping toward the human good. Only the enlightened system of ideas can make conscience emerge because non-enlightened ideas (1) are obscure and indistinct and (2) cannot produce audible sound. Rousseau maintains that they generate

the counterfeit noise of fanatics. Hence, prior to the Enlightenment, conscience had no voice.

Rousseau uses the idea of tolerance to conflate the ideas of metaphysics and politics and reduce the moral and political principle of justice to an epistemological tool serving a political project: to effect a state of higher metaphysical and historical consciousness, a state of enlightened socialist feeling and enlightened reading of history which, in our time, in some quarters, appears to be increasingly becoming the chief end of science.

The modern and Enlightenment reduction of science and truth to mathematical physics is without intellectual justification. Apart from universal feeling that some, higher, more inclusive social feeling, a kind of socialist agent intellect shared by “tolerant” people, collectively establishes truth, it has no criterion of truth. Rousseau knew this. In his hands “tolerant” people replace Averroes’s Aristotle, Petrarch’s theologizing poets, Descartes’s extraordinary man of pure reason, and the classical agent intellect and the liberal arts as handmaidens to higher learning. In his hands, science, philosophy, becomes reduced to being in the right historical state of mind, having the right feelings about accepting any and all differences that the new agent intellect of Enlightened intellectuals at any time collectively dictate.

Rousseau’s influence on Kant is legendary. Kant considered Rousseau to be another Newton. He claimed that just as Newton had completed the science of external nature and laid bare the order and regularity of the external world, Rousseau had discovered the hidden nature of man.¹⁴

Rousseau’s teachings about tolerance heavily influenced Kant’s political writings, especially his famous work “An Answer to the Question “What is Enlightenment?.”

Kant's political writings, views about enlightenment, in turn, heavily influenced Georg Hegel.¹⁵ In this way, I maintain Rousseau's teaching about tolerance gradually became the chief influence for the emergence of a neo-Averroistic understanding of tolerance in our own time, especially among Western college students.

I conclude this article by making note that, in two major recent addresses (at the University of Regensburg and The Catholic University of America) Pope Benedict XVI cautioned his audiences about the dangers of a crisis of truth that the narrowness of positivistic reason presents to the contemporary world.¹⁶ At the Catholic University of America, His Holiness maintained, "Christian educators can liberate the young from the limits of positivism and awaken receptivity to truth, to God and his goodness."¹⁷

I concur with both papal statements. In large part I have written this article to assist His Holiness in the liberation movement of reason that he is attempting to effect because I think those who support what the Pope is seeking to achieve cannot be completely successful unless we realize that the nature of the precise enemy we face is more than positivism: a neo-Averroism inherited from Rousseau and the disordered understanding of tolerance that this neo-Averroism essentially employs as its hermeneutic for reading history and the whole of politics, ethics, science, and truth.

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NOTES

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- ¹ Immanuel Kant, "Preface," *Critique of Pure Reason*.
- ² Étienne Gilson. *Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 140.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 91. See, also, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1979), pp. 273–275.
- ⁴ Peter A. Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 1998), pp. 91–92. See, also, Rousseau, *Emile*, pp. 285–287.
- ⁵ Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*, pp. 72–73. See, also, Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans Allan Bloom (New York, Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1979), pp. 285–287.
- ⁶ Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*, pp. 15–16. See, also, Frank E. Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 89-121, 139-168.
- ⁷ John Maynard Keynes, "Newton the Man," in *Newton*, ed. I. Bernard Cohen and Richard S. Westfall (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1995), p.315.
- ⁸ Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*, p. 13. See, also, Redpath, *Wisdom's Odyssey from Philosophy to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 1998), pp. 133–145.
- ⁹ Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*, p. 20.
- ¹⁰ Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*, pp. 13–35.
- ¹¹ Peter A. Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B. V., 1997), p. 20. See Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, pp. 125–126.
- ¹² Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare*, p. 20.
- ¹³ Étienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 65. I thank James V. Schall, S. J. for recalling this passage to my attention. See his article, "Possessed of Both a Reason and a Revelation," *A Thomistic Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Étienne Gilson* ed. Peter A. Redpath (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B. V., 2002).
- ¹⁴ Gerald J. Galgan, *The Logic of Modernity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1962), p. 221.
- ¹⁵ For a more detailed consideration of Rousseau's influence on Kant and Hegel, see Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*, pp.67–229.
- ¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to München, Altötting, and Regensburg (09–14 September 2006), Meeting with the Representatives of Science, Lecture of the Holy Father, *Aula magna* of the University of Regensburg. 12 September 2006.

(URL=http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006.

Pope Benedict XVI, "Speech to Educators," Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the United States of America (15–21 April 2008), Meeting with Catholic Educators, Conference Hall of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., 17 April 2008.

(URL=http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_cath-univ-washington_en.html), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, "Speech to Educators."