

CONSIDERATIONS ON KNOWLEDGE PHILOSOPHY DURING THE RENAISSANCE¹

BOGDAN BAGHIU²

Abstract. Knowledge philosophy during the Renaissance is a fascinating and challenging subject, especially due to the loose ends left behind by various researchers, probably because of the multitude of hermeneutic tracks. Our penchant for renaissant gnoseology and epistemology may seem illicit, especially since we speak of term ambiguity, which “triggers disputes” of various orientations related to the modern paradigm of knowledge philosophy. The theory of our article is that, as long as epistemology modernity denies its roots, it will be incomplete and incapable of dominating a certain eclectic component.

Renaissance philosophy undeniably witnesses the return of human thought to the knowledge philosophy models of Antiquity. Placing man in a universe that allows him to prove the full extent of his self-knowledge leads to a Platonic idealism approach. Idealist renaissant epistemology applies to sciences that rely on both rational and irrational concepts. Hence, when speaking of renaissant scientific epistemology, one cannot be said to belong precisely to the analytical thinking category or to refer exactly to actual immediate reality data (Shumaker, 2003). Renaissance rehabilitates the assumption according to which the world cannot be fully known unless one bears in mind that this knowledge is attained only because the soul exists and has epistemic manifestations, in the sense of an integrative metaphysical concept. It is therefore only natural that the term of epistemology differs from the meaning assigned to it by modern thinking, since it originates in a metaphysical and religious tradition.

The ideas related to world knowledge are different from those tackled in the Middle Ages since they no longer rely on universe immutability, but on the human soul, which is the vehicle that makes it possible for man to travel through all the possible worlds and hence know them. One may notice here a comeback of Plato’s ideal of natural knowledge. The ideals on which renaissant knowledge philosophy is based are completely different from those of the Middle Ages.

The ideal of *homo universalis* is actually a comeback of the ideal of the man coming out of the Platonic cave, which is represented here by the Middle Ages themselves. Knowledge thus loses its dogmatic nature and absolutist drives. The

¹ *Acknowledgement:* This paper was drafted within The Knowledge Based Society Project supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme – Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU ID 56815.

² Post-doctoral fellowship, Romanian Academy, Iassy Branch, “Gh. Zane” Institute of Economic and Social Research.

consequence is the recurrence of criticism forms specific to ancient philosophy, as they were dealt with by authors such as Pythagoras, Empedocles, Socrates, Plato, Democritus, Epicurus, Pyrrhus, Plotinus, Cicero, Seneca, a criticism that was often pushed to extremes and had tragic repercussions on their authors, as people relearn to die for the truths of knowledge during the Renaissance. Paradoxically, the irrational dominates the desires of those who want to set up a knowledge-based society, where the freedom of scientific opinions is respected. Everything that is related to renaissance gnoseology and epistemology has a very powerful emotional background. It is therefore normal for the researchers of this phenomenon to try and detect what is myth and what is reality behind these oversimplifications, which may be due to a series of almost idyllic conceptions of Renaissance. However, it must be firmly stated that the conceptions of self-knowledge and world knowledge were visibly altered by Renaissance.

This paradigm change occurred due to the fact that the fields of reality fundamentally modified their comprehension structure. The polyvalent understanding of the world is the essence of the paradigm change that accompanied the transition from the Middle Ages to Renaissance.

As for renaissance epistemology structuring, its main characteristic would be its syncretism, since it would be a melting pot of Egyptian, Greek and Jewish traditions, all filtered by the Hellenistic philosophy, especially by Platonism and its Neoplatonic derivatives, without forgetting nevertheless the influences of Arabic thought.

One must bear in mind that Renaissance, through its genius artists, creates the extraordinary visualization of knowledge using all sorts of metaphors. Knowledge philosophy materializes in a series of palpable artifacts. Suffice it to think of the alchemy tradition, which is actually the path to human spirit faultlessness knowledge, and we have eloquent proof of the manner in which renaissance thinkers attempted to create whole rituals designed to describe knowledge. The plastic representation of knowledge is best reflected by Giordano Bruno's dialogues, especially in his famous *Degli eroici furori*, and also in his plays, for instance in the comedy called *The Candlemaker* (the main character in these works is both a philosopher and a painter).

Bruno's work tackles the important issue of Platonic gnoseology and epistemology, more precisely the inability of the human mind to enter a World of Ideas. Renaissance epistemology is most often expressed by ancient myths, especially those of Greek and Latin origin. The great drawback of this way of expression is the fact that resorting to myths brings about criticism of the renaissance sciences from the supporters of the analytical philosophical model. However, just as Ioan Petru Culianu pointed out in his work *Eros și Magie în Renaștere 1484* (*Eros and Magic during the Renaissance 1484*), (Culianu, 2003) the Renaissance sciences, such as astrology, medicine, alchemy or magic, represented solid landmarks and important knowledge tools for the age that they were developed in

and for the people that believed in them. Both Platonism and the other currents of ancient philosophy fully contributed to the creation of a genuine Renaissance-specific scientific spirit. Culianu therefore rejected any association between the Popperian term of science and the Renaissance sciences, preferring the Platonic tradition that named them arts. In another work, however, called *Jocurile minții* (Mind Games), he stated that most of the experimental modern sciences owe a lot to these very arts transmitted by what is generally referred to as the hermetic tradition.

The hermetic tradition includes systems of rules, sometimes unwritten, and sometimes represented symbolically, designed to found knowledge. Some authors consider the renaissance Hermeticism as a relic of what survived of the pre-Christian ritual religions and practices throughout the Christian Middle Ages; and it is not by chance that this term was chosen to define these systems of knowledge rules, as it is well-known that in the Greek Parthenon Hermes was the god of knowledge, while his Egyptian “counterpart” was Toth. These gods were considered the transmitters and keepers of divine knowledge in general.

The term Hermeticism also acquired an alchemical connotation during the Renaissance, as it designated a mix of all these pre-Christian traditions that had been put together in order to achieve the Philosophers’ Stone, that is Absolute Knowledge, the pure and unmediated knowledge of God. Marsilio Ficino referred to all this tradition on the unity of knowledge of the ultimate existential truths as *Prisca Theologia*. Ficino describes a primary tradition, that is a Logocentric tradition, where the Logos brings unity to both the visible and the invisible world. In fact, the idea that this primary Logos exists is nothing else but a reinterpretation of the prologue of the Gospel of John, where he referred clearly to the Word as the one that was in the beginning. And the ultimate goal of great enlightened scholars of the Renaissance was this very Knowledgeable Logos, which they searched for through all the arts they practiced.

All these arts, from magic to alchemy, are cognitive scenarios in search of the primary ontological scenario, and they may also be seen as attempts of the human mind to embrace knowledge as a whole.

The renaissance utopias, such as Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas Solis* (Campaneella, 2006) or Thomas Morus’ *Utopia* (Morus, 2001), are themselves imageries of possible societies created relying on this ancestral Wisdom. And these representations of the Ideal City originating in Plato’s Republic are undoubtedly a response to the failure of Medieval Christianity of building the City of God starting from the aristotelization of Christian dogmas. The Renaissance City is a city of knowledge, where human freedom is achieved by sympathy between the man’s individual consciousness and the Universal Logos. The renaissance philosopher, who is a man of the City, resizes knowledge and gives it a magical aura, just as it had in the Ancient Polis, where it depended on passionate desires. The Neoplatonic model of the Renaissance City proves the failure of medieval theocracies based on Aristotelian rigor.

The renaissance sciences are governed by the principle of sympathetic magic. Knowledge becomes a ritual again, as it was described by the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition. The renaissance sciences accept the idea of the unknown, of the unfathomable, of knowledge daimon. The renaissance science logos is a prophetic logos again, a reaction to the dogmatic logos of medieval Aristotelianism. Science is no longer a set of dogmas that have to be accepted, but an adventurous journey in the collective unconscious. A continuum is achieved again between human consciousness thirsty for knowledge and the Universe that is the source of all that needs to be known, which consequently alters both the anthropology of human knowledge and naturally the epistemology of the sciences that man discovers or rediscovers. Nevertheless, these encounters between the human mind and spirit and their new revelations need a ritual. D. P. Walker (Walker, 2010) notices, for instance, that Ficino conceived the act of knowledge in the same manner as a religious ritual. Or, I think that this is the actual difference between medieval and renaissance knowledge, since the renaissance philosophers conceived it as a ritual, unlike the medieval scholars who considered it a dogma. These rituals resurrect a whole arsenal of concepts used by ancient wisdom, which more or less survived the medieval theological dogmatization. We witness the reoccurrence of issues related to the mystic Platonism³ (Cornford, 2009) found in Gorgias, Menon, Banquet, Phaidon, Republic, Phaidros. These mystic dialogues tackle major ontological and gnoseological preoccupations such as: the nature of things, the divine nature of soul or immortality. Therefore, following the Neoplatonic tradition that preceded them, the renaissance authors revive such topics as mystic existence and knowledge. Their approaches are nonetheless dependent on sciences, many of which have magical and philosophic grounds. These renaissance sciences are supposed to answer questions related to cosmic fate.

The philosophers and magicians of these times knew that science was possible only by synchronizing the human mind with the Universal Reason and soul. Renaissance Neoplatonism focuses again on complete and total knowledge, where the schism between the mind and the body no longer exists. The magical unity of knowledge thus becomes legitimate. In other words, human nature becomes again the magical measure of all things that can and need to be known. The fate of the renaissance man is to know things related to his self, which establishes correct relations with a Self of the world. The concept of Reality resides precisely in this subtle relation in search of an identity logic, which is not however an absolute metaphysical identity, but an identity which includes man and his conscience. In defining his magical knowledge doctrine, Pico della Mirandola insists on the idea of Neoplatonic origin according to which man is what he

³ Francis Cornford in his work *De la religie la filosofie. Un studiu asupra originilor speculației occidentale (From Religion to Philosophy. A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation)* Bucharest, Herald, 2009 conducts a dichotomy of Plato's dialogues, by diving them in *Socratic* and *mystical*. The mystical ones reveal a Plato contaminated by Orphism and Pythagoreanism.

becomes through self-knowledge. Man must hence participate in the modeling of the world through knowledge. Extending human conscience beyond the possible reason acquired by a pre-established fact of life is the great revolution proposed by Copernicus in knowledge philosophy during the renaissant period. The subjectivity of human conscience is no longer reproved as in the Middle Ages, and it is considered a way of communicating with the Universe.

We also witness the recurrence of the idea that inter-subjective relations may be established between man and Nature, capable of providing access to unbelievable cognitive powers and virtues. This form of natural magic with cognitive goals is considered by some authors as the precursor of modern natural sciences, hence its epistemic nature similar to that of these sciences. The latter have naturally given up many of the epistemic presuppositions of natural magic. The existence of a continuum, of knowledge resulted from the sympathetic communication with nature, cannot be completely denied, not even by the most rigid positivist supporters.

When discussing the architectonics of the knowledge philosophy of the Renaissance, one must bear in mind that its expression often takes the form of mythological parables. The harmony between logos and mythos is somewhat resumed, as this harmony already existed in the tradition of the Universal Wisdom. Symbol interpretation is extremely valuable on this pre-epistemological background. The association between the cognitive states of conscience and the components of nature (celestial bodies, chemical substances, plants, animals) leads to a magical-hermeneutic knowledge of the world. Even when the scientific experiment exists, its results are presented using a cryptic mystical-religious language. This urges Ioan Petru Culianu to elaborate, in his work called *Jocurile Minții* (Culianu, 2002), on the fact that renaissant sciences enjoyed a special yet solid epistemology, which relied on founding principles that were different from what we currently refer to as epistemology. Culianu draws however our attention on the subtlety of the fact that the way in which we have to talk about the renaissant knowledge phenomenon should not be interfered with by the presuppositions of a modern theory of knowledge. The Romanian author even accuses Paul Feyerabend that when the latter describes the irrationality of the renaissant phenomenon of knowledge he employs modern analysis tools that are unsuitable for the gnoseological and epistemological spirit of that period. In other words, this attribute of irrational may lead to an unnatural opposition in what concerns knowledge methods and tools.

Renaissance starts by dethroning the logical-empirical solipsism of scholastic Neoaristotelianism, it brings the universe back to its primordial role and reality, which is magical and hence naturally conditioned by “unity, totality, organicity, relationality, analogical sympathetic and synergic structure, pneumatic continuity and cosmic-erotic focus” (Mureșan, 2000). The idea of renaissant science is a continuation of the idea of sacred science, as it was perceived during the classical

Antiquity. This sacred science was based on the macrocosm-microcosm analogy, a paradigm that was to be fully exploited by all the renaissance practices. The categories used by this science are different from both those of medieval theology and of modern sciences.

Renaissant knowledge philosophy is thus characterized by an integrative vision of the human mind in the Universe. The magical components that survived from Antiquity urge human reason to build scenarios on the Whole and not only on parts of the reality explained and understood by resorting to a series of dogmatic oversimplifications. The Renaissance sees the resurrection of that exaltation of knowledge as a magical act, capable of guiding man towards the essence of things. Synthetically speaking, in renaissance philosophy, knowledge is the freedom that man takes to return to nature in order to get to know both himself and the Universe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Campanella Tommaso, *Cetatea Soarelui. Poezii filosofice*, editura Humanitas, București, 2006, ISBN 973-50-1486-6
2. Cornford Francis, *De la religie la filosofie. Un studiu asupra originilor speculației occidentale* pp. 260-261, editura Herald, București, 2009, ISBN 978-973-111-094-3.
3. Culiianu Ioan Petru, *Eros și magie în Renaștere 1484*, pp.240-258 editura Polirom, Iași, 2003, ISBN:973-681-234-0.
4. Culiianu Ioan Petru, *Jocurile minții*, pp.104-111, editura Polirom, Iași, 2002, ISBN 973-683-910-9
5. Morus Thomas, *Utopia*, editura Gramar, București, 2001, ISBN 973-9349-31-5
6. Shumaker Wayne, *Științele oculte ale Renașterii*, p.11, editura Dacia, Cluj, 2003, ISBN 973-35-1774-7.
7. Vianu Mureșan, *Fundamentele filosofice ale magiei*, pp.179-180 editura Dacia, Cluj, 2000, ISBN 973-35-0875-6.
8. Walker Daniel Pikerling, *Magia spirituală și angelică. De la Ficino la Campanella*, p. 49, editura Herald, București, 2010, ISBN 978-973-111-189-6.