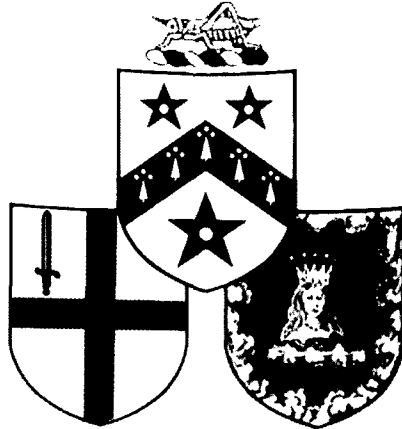


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**MIND, MORALS AND THE ORIGIN OF OUR  
IDEAS**

Lecture 5

**ARE IDEAS INDESTRUCTIBLE? HOW ARE THEY  
TRANSMITTED AND REVIVED?**

by

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# Are ideas indestructible?

## Revision and Revival in the history of thought

Professor Richard Sorabji

### The Questions

Are any past ideas so obsolete that they could not be revived? Are any present ideas so entrenched that they could not be given up? Do ideas belong to the context of a certain time, so that they could not occur before or after a certain date? If some of our ideas are entrenched, must we view them as the inevitable product of our history, rather than being open to question? If we look at how they were formed, will that show us why we cannot give them up, or will it sometimes reveal to us that they are unjustified?

Whichever view we take, it may be very important to be aware of the history of our ideas. But on one view, studying that history may show us why we are trapped, why we *have* to think the way we do. This is sobering, and may give us a just sense of modesty about the objectivity of our ideas. On another view, studying the history of ideas is liberating. The history of ideas may be a reservoir from which we can replenish our own ways of thinking. The history of our own ideas may be sobering in a different way, that it leads us to discard them. Philosophy depends on a philosophical imagination. The last fifty years have seen many good ideas, but the last 2500 of Western Philosophy are a far greater resource, especially if they are taken to include Islamic and Jewish Philosophy, even before we consider philosophies from further East.

### Anticipation

Let me start with an example of an idea which did not have to wait until modern times for its birth, because it was anticipated 1400 hundred years earlier. I am thinking of Bishop Berkeley's theory known as Idealism. Berkeley in the 18th century solved a problem about knowledge made acute by Descartes - if we perceive only the ideas in our minds, how do we ever get to know about the tables and chairs that give us those ideas? Berkeley's reply was that tables and chairs are just bundles of ideas existing in minds, always in the mind of God and intermittently in our minds, so we know them directly. It has been thought that this view could not have occurred before Descartes.

But the idea is fully formulated in the 4th century AD by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, only in relation to an entirely different problem posed by the pagan philosopher Porphyry - since cause must supposedly be like effect, how can an immaterial God create a material world? Gregory's answer: the world is not material in quite the way you think. Material objects are just bundles of God's ideas<sup>1</sup>.

Here the same theory is devised in relation to an entirely different problem, although the relation between Gregory and Berkeley is closer, because Berkeley claims it as an extra merit of the theory that it also solves the problem of how an immaterial God can create a material world.

Did Berkeley know Gregory's theory, or reinvent it? I don't know. But what I can say is that a theory does not necessarily change out of recognition when it is used for a completely different purpose, although it may sometimes. In the case of Gregory's theory and

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* Ch. 18; *Matter, Space and Motion* Ch. 4

Berkeley's, they correspond even in their fine details. This possibility of detachment from the original context makes it easier for ideas to recur. If Gregory's theory is an anticipation, Berkeley's is a revival. I have spoken of anticipation merely because Berkeley's version is currently better known.

## Revival

Let me take another rather different example of an idea being revived, this time not quite in its original form. I am thinking of the parallel between Avicenna's 'Flying Man' argument and the 'Cogito'. It is well known that in the 17th century Descartes had it pointed out to him that his famous Cogito argument had been anticipated by Augustine 900 years earlier around 400AD. Descartes' way of answering sceptical doubt in his *Second Meditation* was to say that one thing is certain, 'I think, I exist'. He concludes it is also certain that his essence is to be a thinking being. But since he does not know whether he is a body, he concludes that at least body cannot be part of his essence.

Augustine has up to a dozen versions of the Cogito, including one in his anti-sceptical work, *Against the Academics*. A very detailed version comes in his later work *On the Trinity*, where Augustine's context is the different one of examining the nature of the human mind, to show that it reflects the divine Trinity. Like Descartes' version, Augustine's here comes in two stages. The first stage establishes certainty about his mind:

But who will doubt that he lives, remembers, understands, wills and judges? For even if he doubts, he lives. If he doubts where his doubt comes from, he remembers. If he doubts, he understands that he doubts. If he doubts, he knows that he does not know. If he doubts, he judges that he ought not rashly to give assent. So whoever acquires a doubt from any source ought not to doubt any of these things whose non-existence would mean that he could not entertain doubt about anything.

Like Descartes, Augustine next argues that his mind is not bodily. His reason is that his mind couldn't know all this without knowing its essence. But it doesn't know whether it is anything bodily So it is not (essentially) anything bodily:

In no way is anything said to be known so long as its essence is not known. So when the mind knows itself, it knows its essence. But it is certain about itself, as the points made above establish. It is not at all certain whether it is air or fire, or anything bodily. So it is none of those things.

What I want to draw attention to is not the well known influence of Augustine on Descartes, but the less well known fact that the great Islamic philosopher Avicenna in the 11th century produced a parallel to the second half of the Cogito argument, and certainly not on the basis of knowing Augustine. For Augustine wrote in Latin, which was not considered a serious language for Philosophy. What the Arabic-speakers read was the Greek philosophers.

Avicenna's Flying Man argument asks you to imagine being created floating through air or vacuum, blindfolded and without any of your limbs touching each other. Then you would know that you existed. And you would also grasp your own essence as what did the knowing. But you would not know whether your soul and self were bodily or extended, since you would have no knowledge of body or extension. So soul and self are not bodily.

This may well be a case of great minds thinking alike. Or do they have a common source? If there is any common source, it will, I believe, once again be Porphyry<sup>2</sup>, whom I have mentioned as inspiring Saint Gregory of Nyssa. For both Augustine and Avicenna are likely

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Philosophy of the Commentators 200-600AD, A Sourcebook*, Psychology volume, Ch.4, forthcoming

to have taken from Porphyry the idea they repeat a great deal that the soul is 'present to itself'. And Porphyry argues in the same context that the intellect's separation from the body in self-awareness shows its essence to be non-bodily. But did Porphyry merely inspire the later thinkers, as he inspired Gregory? Our evidence does not allow us to go further and speculate that Porphyry himself had invented the Cogito.

A final example of ideas being revived will be enough for now. It is supplied by Derek Parfit's book, *Reasons and Persons*, and its treatment of personal survival. Parfit imagines two scenarios in which the question might be raised whether the same person still exists. The first is teletransportation, as envisaged in the television series *Star Trek*. Suppose your body is destroyed, but all the information required to reconstitute it out of new matter is beamed electronically to a distant spot. Would the reconstituted person be you? The second is brain transplant. Suppose your body is ageing, but at least half your brain, carrying all your mental characteristics, is transplanted into a fitter body. Would the transplant be you? And would it still be you, Parfit asked, following Bernard Williams, if a second successful transplant was done with the other half of your brain? <sup>3</sup> Parfit's two scenarios are drawn from Science or Science Fiction, yet they match the scenarios drawn from a religious context in the third century AD. Would the resurrection after death in which Christians believe be achieved by God creating an entirely new body for us, as suggested by the brilliant Christian thinker, Origen? Or would that be destruction? And were the majority of Christians right that a part of your present body, Thomas Aquinas was to say an *essential* part, would have to be transplanted by God into the resurrection body? Those who are frightened at the thought of being teletransported might well be frightened at the thought of Origen's method of resurrection. In that case, resurrection could well depend on an essential part of their body being preserved.

I believe that Antiquity even anticipated, in the different context of the Stoics on differentiating people, the question about whether a person's survival could depend simply on the survival of another person sufficiently like the first. That, at any rate, is how I interpret what I might call the Shrinking Argument, which was posed in the third century BC by the Stoic Chrysippus in reply to the Growing Argument. If the Growing Argument had been right that Growing gives us a new person, then shrinking should bring us back the original person. But it would not: the original person would be denied this resuscitation, though merely by the survival of the one who had shrunk.<sup>4</sup>

I am sure that Parfit was not aware of any of these anticipations, and he was also not aware originally that his conclusions had been anticipated by the ancient Buddhists, although this was pointed out at book length by Stephen Collins,<sup>5</sup> and Parfit welcomed the finding. Parfit's conclusion was that the identity of the self-same person cannot be guaranteed over time. There is no continuing self in this sense. Rather, our concern should be extended not to one

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<sup>3</sup>Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, revised edition, Oxford University Press 1987; Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p.20; discussed Richard Sorabji, *Philosophy of the Commentators 200-600 AD, A Sourcebook*, Logic and Metaphysics volume, Ch.6, forthcoming

<sup>4</sup> This is how I interpret the report in the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, *On the Eternity of the World* 48, in my forthcoming *The Philosophy of the Ancient Commentators, 200-600AD*, 3 vols, Logic and Metaphysics.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge 1982.

particular future person whom we rashly think of as identical with our present self, but to those persons, future and present, who have the right psychological links with us.

I have not been saying that all ideas will be revived. Some are lost forever, and the case I will mention below of the execution of Boethius reminds us that a political decision may cause ideas to be lost to a society for 600 years.

Nonetheless, I find it encouraging, when there are political threats to the study of ideas, to think how resilient ideas can be.

I might issue a challenge. Can anyone think of an idea so obsolete that it could not be revived. The divine right of kings? The idea of the world as a living organism?

But it is not just ideas we think of as outlandish that get revived. The revived ideas are sometimes ones of direct utility for our own philosophising. We may think of Arthur Prior's reintroduction of medieval tense logic,<sup>6</sup> or of the renewed awareness that there are many different types of necessity.<sup>7</sup> I think this was for a while overlooked by many philosophers in the mid-20th century, insofar as they took as their paradigm, just one type, necessity based on the meanings of words. Then the idea of a variety of kinds was again made prominent or reinvented by the excellent work of such philosophers as Alvin Plantinga and Saul Kripke. But the idea need not have been forgotten. A further example is Aristotle's insight that not everything has a causal explanation, because coincidences do not, which has been used to attack reductionist modes of explanation in economics.<sup>8</sup>

## Revision

Another value of studying the history of ideas is the opposite of revival. When we see the ancient origins of our entrenched ideas, this can lead us to question and even reject them. A case in point for me was the very entrenched idea, that there is no harm in killing animals. We eat them every day. When I wrote a book on ancient ideas about animal minds, I was struck not by any arguments that we should not kill animals, but by the atrociously weak character of the arguments that it was perfectly alright to do so.<sup>9</sup> Christ, of course, was born into a meat eating tradition. And St Augustine gave a very influential defence of the practice of killing animals, which must have helped to reassure our tradition. In the *City of God*, 1.20, he is discussing the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', and applies it to suicide. Suicide is never justified, in his view. But he wants to make an exception for killing animals, and he has no better means than the ancient Stoic defence. According to the Stoics, rational beings are bound together by ties of attachment (*oikeiosis*) into a community. This carried the very distinctive implication that justice is owed to all human beings whatsoever, slaves and foreigners alike. I suspect that the Stoic idea of the community of all humans was one of the arguments used in the admirable debate before Charles the Fifth of Spain in 1550-1 against the enslavement of American Indians. But this humane view had its dark side. Allegedly, no

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur N. Prior, *Past, Present and Future*, Oxford 1967; *Papers on Time and Tense*, Oxford 1968

<sup>7</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford 1974; Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 3 Lectures in G. Harman, D. Davidson, eds, *Semantics of Natural Languages*, Dordrecht 1972. Some types of necessity are mentioned in Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, London and Ithaca New York 1980

<sup>8</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, London and Ithaca New York 1980, Ch.1; David Owens, *Causes and Coincidences*, Cambridge 1992

<sup>9</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals*, London and Ithaca New York, 1993.

animals have reason (a view that I consider neither true nor relevant), and so do not belong to the community. Hence nothing we do to them can count as an injustice. The weakness of this influential argument was what led me to change my views on how to treat animals.

## Transmutation

It would be a great mistake to assume at the merest hint of similarity that an idea has been revived. Ideas can indeed be only superficially similar, and one has to study the historical context case by case. Besides superficial similarity, there is also the case of distortion and transmutation. And yet distortions and transmutations are also interesting and can sometimes be philosophically fruitful. One such distortion was the conversion of pagan Stoic ideas about avoiding agitation into Christian ideas about avoiding temptation. The Stoics said that every emotion involves the thought that there is benefit or harm at hand, and what matters is whether this thought is right or wrong. You are not indulging in emotion until you judge it to be right. But before that, you ought to be assessing the *appearance* that it is right. The mere appearance does not yet constitute emotion, although it will do so, if you unthinkingly judge that the appearance is right, as non-Stoics tend to do. You should not worry if the appearance creates in you little jolts of the mind or body, shuddering, trembling, tears, pallor or pangs. These are just side effects, or 'first movements', as they were called, but they are not thoughts, merely jolts. And it is the *thoughts* that matter and the *thoughts* that constitute emotion. You cannot help the mere appearance and the resulting jolts. But you *can* avoid agreeing to a mistaken appearance that you are really in a bad position. This is due to a failure to reflect.

The Christians took the Stoic idea of first movements, which were *not* thoughts, and turned them into thoughts, namely the *bad* thoughts mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. These thoughts are temptations, thoughts of gluttony, anger, lust and so on. Moreover, whereas the Stoics had made you entirely blameless for experiencing the jolt of a first movement, the Christians liked to distinguish innumerable degrees of blame, requiring different degrees of atonement, if you dwelt on the thought, took pleasure in it, and so on. They built up techniques for dispelling the bad thoughts, and the principal thoughts were turned into the seven cardinal sins. Although this was very different indeed from what the Stoics wanted for their project of fostering imperturbability, it was ideally suited to the new Christian project of combating temptation<sup>10</sup>.

Another fruitful transmutation arose from the claim of the pagan Neoplatonists that Plato and his pupil Aristotle, and in the end nearly all pagan Greek philosophers, agreed with each other. It was the Christians who contradicted each other. Of course, the Christians said the opposite. As an anti-Christian move, the Neoplatonists wrongly made out that Aristotle agreed with Plato that God was Creator of the Universe. Actually, Aristotle's God was a thinker, not a Creator. God's thinking was about Science and Philosophy as abstract systems. Thought about the particularities of the universe would be beneath Aristotle's God, and was not needed for purposes of Creation, since the universe had existed without beginning. God's thought had only a very indirect influence on it. But the Neoplatonists managed to represent Aristotle's God as the beginningless Creator of the beginningless universe all the same.

Similarly, the Neoplatonists made Aristotle agree with Plato that the human soul has an immortal part. Aristotle's chief emphasis is that to talk of soul is to talk of the life-manifesting capacities of organisms, and that these capacities obviously do not outlast the death of the body. But the Neoplatonists managed to build up Aristotle's very brief remarks about an illuminating intellect resident within us into the idea that the human soul has an immortal part, just as his teacher Plato had said.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation*, Oxford 2000, Chs 22-3

These anti-Christian transmutations of Aristotle had an ironical result nine hundred years later. For they enabled Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century to make Aristotle basic to his Christian Theology. Had he thought that Aristotle denied that God was a Creator and that the human soul was immortal, Aristotle would have been discarded. But the anti-Christian reinterpretation by the Neoplatonists had accidentally made Aristotle safe for Christianity<sup>11</sup>. This, incidentally, is one reason why the history of philosophy cannot be understood, if you skip, as always used to be done, from one famous thinker to the next, for example from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas 1600 years later, or to Descartes nearly 2000 years later. Clearly you cannot understand Thomas Aquinas if you skip the Neoplatonists through whose lenses he was reading Aristotle.

A final example of fruitful transmutation, although not everyone agrees with me that there is transmutation here, is the history of the idea of intentional objects. Brentano in the 19th century made these objects central to modern philosophy of mind. The idea is that if you hope for a fortune, the fortune does not have to exist in order to be the object of your hopes. Contrast cutting a tree down. The tree has to exist in order to be the object of the act of cutting. Brentano thought that mental acts are distinguished from physical acts by the fact that they are all directed to objects of this sort which do not have to exist in order to serve as objects. Brentano claimed to get the idea of intentional objects from the tradition of Thomas Aquinas. But Thomas got it from the Islamic philosopher Avicenna, and Avicenna got it, I have argued,<sup>12</sup> from the ancient Greek commentators who read it into Aristotle. Is it in Aristotle? Not in my opinion. For I take Aristotle to say that when you see a coloured scene, your eye jelly takes on corresponding patches of colour. The ancient Greek commentators who expounded Aristotle, however, from 500 to 900 years later got worried about colours colliding in mid-air and masking each other. They noticed that smells and sounds do to some extent collide and mask each other, but not wholly so. Hence they devised a theory, and ascribed it to Aristotle to rescue him, according to which it is not colour patches that the eye jelly receives, but an intentional object of vision. The senses of smell and hearing receive objects that are to a lesser extent intentional. Thus, on this interpretation, the fruitful idea of an intentional object was transmitted as a corrective to Aristotle's original theory of a more literal kind of coloration .

One might have thought that some of the pressures mentioned would be bad for Philosophy. Having to convince the Christians that Plato and Aristotle agreed with each other on almost everything would surely lead to loss of their wonderful insights. But in fact it produced a new philosophy, interesting in its own right, of Neoplatonism.

Another example of pressure being fruitful, instead of destructive, was supplied by Edward Grant.<sup>13</sup> In 1277, just after the death of Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Tempier of Paris condemned 219 philosophical and theological propositions. One might no longer say that it was beyond God's power to move the entire physical universe sideways. What on earth would this mean? Were the philosophers being forced into talking nonsense by the imposition of clerical correctness? Not at all, says Grant. The need to avoid the condemned propositions proved a valuable stimulus to the imagination about how to think of space and time. I think that something of the same kind happened earlier with the Greek Neoplatonists. They took Plato to postulate a changeless and timeless world of divine Platonic Forms and they had to think out how such a world would relate to the temporal, changing world

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle Transformed*, Ch 1 and more especially Chapter 6 by P.Hadot

<sup>12</sup> Richard Sorabji, 'The idea of intentional objects from Aristotle to Brentano', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, supp. vol. 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Grant, 'The condemnation of 1277', *Viator* 10, 1979, 211-44

described by Aristotle. The results have something in common with the speculations of a modern physicist, David Bohm, in his book, *The Implicate Order*.<sup>14</sup>

Transmutations sometimes take the form of misattributing the ideas of one person to another, and this can happen because of a choice of book title. Thus the Neoplatonist Porphyry wrote an *Introduction* to Aristotle more than 500 years after Aristotle. It was for beginning students who were about to read an elementary work of Aristotle's, the *Categories*, which does not make use of ideas like matter and form. I am guessing that it was for this reason, rather than any other, that Porphyry does not explain how Aristotle thinks of individuals as differentiated by matter. Instead he borrows from Plato's *Theaetetus*, presumably as easier to understand, the idea that an individual person like Socrates consists of nothing but a distinctive bundle of qualities. Aristotle would have insisted that individuals consist of matter and form, but the bundle view is taken by later Neoplatonists, Proclus and Simplicius, to be the view of the Aristotelian School, I am guessing this was because it appeared in a work that Porphyry presented as an introduction to Aristotle.<sup>15</sup> Another example has been given by Fritz Zimmermann. Excerpts from the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Proclus, were translated into Arabic, and one set of excerpts was given a title implying that it was expounding the theological views of Aristotle. The Neoplatonists liked to think that Aristotle would have agreed with the Neoplatonists' elaborate Theology. Because of the title, which may have got truncated as *The Theology of Aristotle*, it was assumed for centuries that the work was actually by Aristotle, who was thus transformed into a believer in high Neoplatonist Theology<sup>16</sup>.

### Separated cultures

I spoke earlier of the revival of ideas. But is a threat to revival suggested by the case of Indian Philosophy? With Indian Philosophy, the accounts given to me by scholars have sometimes led me to think, 'great minds think alike', but have never led me, except in the case of Buddhism, to think, 'the Indian and Western ideas are so close that one must have read the other.' Does this mean that ideas are never really close, unless one party has heard, at least indirectly, of the ideas of the other?

Rather, I think Indian Philosophy constitutes a special case. Wilhelm Halbfass, in his book, *India and Europe*,<sup>17</sup> has argued that Indian Philosophy, unlike technology and other disciplines, was the preserve of Brahmin priests, who even today are brought up speaking ancient Sanskrit and eating separately from others. Unlike the Buddhists, who did proselytise, the Brahmin priests considered that the West was only good at boring things like conquering. But when it came to actual thinking, the West couldn't do it. One should not study a foreign Philosophy until one had completely mastered one's own, for which one incarnation would scarcely be sufficient. I hope I have not too much distorted the views of

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<sup>14</sup> David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Routledge 1980, cf. Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, London and Ithaca new York 1983, 8; 257; 382.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Philosophy of the Commentators 200-600AD, A Sourcebook*, Logic and Metaphysics volume, Ch.6, forthcoming

<sup>16</sup> Fritz Zimmermann, 'The origins of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*,' in Jill Kraye, W.F.Ryan, C.B.Schmitt, eds, *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages*, publications of the Warburg Institute, London 1986, 110-295.

<sup>17</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, Albany, New York 1988



Halbfass. This tradition is already exemplified by the case of the conquest of North West India by Aristotle's pupil, Alexander the Great, in the fourth century BC. The story may be apocryphal, but it testifies to an attitude that was real enough. Alexander sent for the Indian philosophers and said, 'Come and tell me about your Philosophy'. 'No', they replied, 'if you are interested, come to us'. On Halbfass' view, there is a special reason, if Indian philosophical ideas, though often analogous to Western, are seldom, if ever, quite identical. There was a peculiarly strong separation of the traditions.

A contrast is provided by the case of the ancient Buddhists. There is a work of the second century BC, *The Questions of Milinda*, in which a Buddhist monk is represented as teaching Menander, a Greek king of Bactria, successor of Alexander's generals, the Buddhist doctrines about there being no continuous self and the ethical consequences, including the consequence that, when so many momentary selves have died already, we should not fear the final death. I believe I have found this Buddhist idea reflected in Greek and Latin texts of the 1st century AD by Seneca and Plutarch, although it is not integrated and made compatible with the rest of what they say.<sup>18</sup> The idea was certainly known to Avicenna, and we have seen it reinvented independently in modern times by Parfit. Some minimal contact of traditions seems to be enough.

The contrast of the Indian case with the Islamic is striking. It is widely acknowledged that from the 9th century AD, Islamic Philosophy was in close dialogue with earlier Greek philosophy. But in 1931, it was suggested by the German scholar, Otto Pretzl, that before that, there was an indigenous Islamic Philosophy too irrationalistic to be influenced by Greek. The star specimen of such work had been translated into English in a way that already caused me to feel some suspicion. Because of the ambiguities created by the medieval Arabic convention of not writing in vowels, the translator was not sure whether the discussion was about atoms or *ants*. But thanks to the paraphrase supplied to me by Fritz Zimmermann, I was able to confirm my suspicion that the Arabic was answering sentence by sentence and line by line an earlier Greek discussion about the effects of discontinuity in space, time, or motion. Atoms would have to move in the cinematographic manner of objects on a movie screen, disappearing from one spot and reappearing a little further on, without ever having been in between.<sup>19</sup> So much for the idea of a totally independent phase of philosophy, although I should stress again that dependence in no way precludes the most extreme originality.

## Translation

The revival of ideas, in this case and others, has been very much helped by translation movements. Greek Philosophy was expounded in Latin in the first century BC by Lucretius and Cicero, and in the next century by Seneca. We find them reflecting on the difficulties of creating a vocabulary for Greek Philosophy in Latin. Greek Philosophy was translated again, often via Syriac, into Arabic, from the late 8th century AD. Most important in this case was the extensive translation movement sponsored by the Caliph of Baghdad in the circle of al-Kindi from 833 AD onwards. That introduced Arabic speakers to Aristotle and his later Greek commentators. Meanwhile the Latin-speaking world knew only a very small part of Greek Philosophy, and less than they might otherwise have known, because Boethius, whose project it had been to translate into Latin Plato and Aristotle and to paraphrase their Greek commentators, was executed for political reasons at around the age of 45, about 524 AD, with only some of the logical works completed. It was not for another 6 centuries in the 12th century AD that the works of Aristotle and his Greek commentators began to become

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<sup>18</sup> *Milinda's Questions*, translated I.B.Horner, *Sacred Books of the Buddhists* vols 22-3, London, Luzac, 1964; Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, Oxford University Press, 2000, Ch. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Time Creation and the Continuum*, Ch. 25

available in profusion in Latin translations from both sides, from the Arabic versions in Spain and from the Greek versions in Constantinople. This translation movement transformed Latin medieval Philosophy. But a warning has been given by Carlos Steel<sup>20</sup> that translation on its own does not have such a powerful effect, unless the climate is right. Why did the works of Plato have no comparable impact on the Latin-speaking West until the time of Ficino in the Renaissance? It was not that there were no Latin translations of Plato, because four works had been translated. But except for the *Timaeus*, his other three works were comparatively little read.

## Archaeology

How far does the modern science of Archaeology help with revival? There are many spectacular cases of this, but the most spectacular case of all is that of Herculaneum, smothered under volcanic lava in 79 AD in the eruption of Vesuvius described by Pliny the Elder. At the end of the 18th century, archaeologists uncovered an Epicurean library, which contained the main works of Epicurus himself, previously lost, along with the works of an Epicurean of about 100 BC, Philodemus, which give insight into the Epicurean School and its values 200 years after Epicurus, and report the rival views of the Stoic School at that time. The problem was that the papyri were so charred that they were very difficult to unroll, or to decipher, when unrolled. The easiest ones were unrolled and the writing carefully copied in the 19th century. In very recent years, new techniques have been brought to bear. Unrolling is attempted by soaking two layers of papyrus at a time, since papyrus is woven across and across in a double weave, and if you soak an odd number of layers you pull the sheet to pieces. When unrolling can be achieved, new techniques of computer enhancement from the last few years, some derived from the US Space Agency, NASA, can turn an apparently uniform black sheet into clear Greek script on the screen at the touch of buttons. But reading cannot at present be done without unrolling first.

Misassembly of the 19th century copies has also been detected, and reassembly is beginning to make sense out of earlier nonsense. The philosophical content of what is comparatively legible is very high. New editions benefiting from new techniques are coming out all the time. But much of the library remains unexcavated, lying as it does under a school. If excavation becomes possible, lost works of Aristotle and other philosophers and also of tragedians and other writers may well be found<sup>21</sup>.

## Other Interpretations

My purpose has been to share some of my own impressions about the history of ideas, not to disagree with others. But what I have been saying is not uncontroversial, because scholars with a knowledge at least as good as mine have taken other views. It has been urged that Berkeley's Idealist theory could not have been invented earlier than Descartes in the seventeenth century.<sup>22</sup> It has been argued that we (where 'we' is construed narrowly, but not so narrowly as to mean 'I') cannot now take seriously Aristotle's application of the idea of

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<sup>20</sup> Carlos Steel, 'Plato Latinus (1939-1989)', in *Rencontres de cultures dans la philosophie medievale: Traductions et traducteurs de l'antiquite tardive du XIV siecle*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1990, 301-316

<sup>21</sup> The journal of this project is *Cronache Ercolanesi*, and there is a book by Marcello Gigante on the original owner of the library, translated into English as *Philodemus in Italy: the Books from Herculaneum*, Ann Arbor 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Myles Burnyeat, 'Idealism in Greek Philosophy: What Descartes saw and Berkeley missed', *Philosophical Review* 91, 1982, 3-40

form and matter to mind and body, or his conception of matter in Biology,<sup>23</sup> and again that we cannot take seriously the ancient belief that Philosophy can have a therapy for calming the emotions.<sup>24</sup> It has been argued that some of our moral and political views, like Liberalism, are for us *simply there*. They are not something we can either justify or abandon, but only understand as the product of our history.<sup>25</sup> These views have been argued in writings of the very highest interest by some of the very best philosophers of our time. About the last, one might worry instead at how easily political assumptions can change, when history takes a new turn and new masters come into power. But at any rate, the alternative impression that I have been trying to convey is of a history of ideas very much freer, more unpredictable, and more open both to revision and to revival.

### **Scepticism about understanding others from outside their tradition**

There are a good many theories which express scepticism about our understanding other traditions at all, though it is hard to say what counts as another tradition. On one influential view, one can understand others only by sharing their way of life.<sup>26</sup> On another view, translation from a completely different tradition is impossible because of radical ambiguity.<sup>27</sup> These theories are based on philosophical considerations. They do not consider the historical basis on which we believe as a matter of fact that we know quite a lot about what the ancient Greeks meant. There have, however been attempts to show that, difficult as it is to understand another tradition, it is possible.<sup>28</sup> I would like to add that, difficult as it is, the outsider may even have some advantages, alongside his or her disadvantages.

It is hard to describe what is exactly contemporary with oneself, except by way of contrast. One can describe it by contrasting it with what went before, as Aristotle described his own Philosophy. Or one can subsequently describe it by contrasting it with what came later. I believe it is easier to see the force of what Plato and Aristotle were saying, when one sees how other people later developed what they said in various different directions, or on the other hand disagreed with it and offered alternatives. To this extent, the historian, looking backwards and forwards, has an advantage in understanding, and this is a reason for studying the texts of more than one period.

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<sup>23</sup> An earlier attack by Bernard Williams, delivered at University College, London, was followed by a very differently grounded critique of Aristotle in Myles Burnyeat, 'Is Aristotelian philosophy of mind still credible?', in Martha Nussbaum, Amelie Rorty, eds, *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, Oxford 1992, supplemented by a further article in the paperback edition of 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Stoic philosophy and the emotions,' in Richard Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle and After*, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Supplement 68, 1997, 211-13

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Philosophy as a humanistic discipline', *Philosophy* 75, 2000, 477-496

<sup>26</sup> Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, London

<sup>27</sup> W.V.O Quine, *Word and Object*, Boston 1960; Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 1984; *Expressing Evaluations*, Lawrence 1984.

<sup>28</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* London 1988.

By the same token, one of the hardest things for the historian is to be conscious of the bias of his or her own time and discount for that. I first studied Plato and Aristotle at the height of the 'Ordinary Language' way of doing Philosophy in England. Plato and Aristotle were often seen as 'ordinary language' philosophers. This fitted Aristotle better than Plato, because he often does rest his case on appeals to ordinary language. But even he, as I came later to argue, was doing much more than ordinary language Philosophy. Just one of those many things was what we would nowadays call Science.<sup>29</sup> Now, no doubt, the biases of which I am least aware are the biases of the present time. It is very easy, by contrast to see the biases of the Neoplatonist age, which was interpreting Aristotle as being in agreement with his teacher Plato, in an effort to establish the inner consistency of pagan religion in face of the crushing triumph of Christianity. Moreover, the Neoplatonists made Aristotle the introduction to a long teaching curriculum which was to culminate in mythical religious experience.

But have I not, then, given away the case to the sceptics, by admitting that the Neoplatonists, six hundred years and more after Aristotle, were hopelessly far away from understanding him? My earlier point that their misunderstanding created a fruitful new Philosophy is no defence against this charge. We can see that the Neoplatonist interpretation in 250 - 600 AD was much further away from Aristotle than the earlier interpretation of a leading member of Aristotle's own School, Alexander, in 200 AD. But even Alexander distorts Aristotle in an attempt to show that Aristotelians already anticipate, where they don't outright reject, the theories of the rival Stoic School. Surely the biases of our own time are going to be no smaller.

That is true, but even the extreme case of Neoplatonism reveals that there is truth inextricably mixed with bias. So difficult was the task of presenting Aristotle as the harmonious introduction to Platonist religious revelation, that every word of the chosen texts had to be known and scrutinised. Again and again, the Neoplatonists investigate why Aristotle has put his point in a certain way, where modern readers might have skimmed over the wording without noticing anything striking. Repeatedly the Neoplatonists are right that Aristotle is echoing Plato. We do not have to agree with their interpretations, but then we do not agree with the interpretations of our contemporaries. We are paid to disagree. What the Neoplatonists do often reveal is that Aristotle's wording is chosen for a reason. We may disagree with them as to what the reason is. But we must thank them for drawing our attention to significant wording that we might have missed. At the same time, our distance from the Neoplatonists positively helps us to discount for their biases. Our own ability to understand partially the ideas of Aristotle is thus positively enhanced by some of the intervening attempts to understand.

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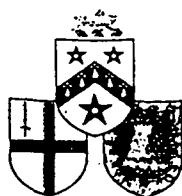
<sup>29</sup> Richard Sorabji, 'Aristotle and Oxford Philosophy' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1969

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