

Puritan Critics of New Philosophy, ca. 1660-1680

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[Abstract]

Puritanism has often been strongly associated with the rise of modern science and philosophy. This essay provides evidence to the contrary that, at least during the period 1660-1680, several Puritans remained largely hostile to the “new philosophy” associated with René Descartes and Pierre Gassendi. An examination of select writings of the period from Richard Baxter, Robert Ferguson, and Samuel Gott demonstrates the prevalence of suspicion and critique of new philosophy among Puritans until at least 1680. After discussing the general relation of Puritanism to seventeenth-century philosophical transition, this essay highlights some common themes uniting the works of Baxter, Ferguson, and Gott. These three promote philosophical eclecticism, interpret the rise of problematic new philosophical concepts as a revival of ancient errors, and raise specific objections regarding theologically problematic implications of new philosophy.

논문투고일 2018.01.31. / 심사완료일 2018.02.20. / 게재확정일 2018.03.05.

Key Words: Puritanism, Cartesianism, Mechanical Philosophy, Atheism, Richard Baxter, Robert Ferguson, Samuel Gott

I . Introduction

The relation between Reformed theology and the rise of modern philosophy and science is a recurring topic of study in modern literature. As is well known, the scientific revolution associated with Bacon, Descartes, and Newton was cultivated on English soil at universities and the Royal Society in the same century when Reformed theology and Puritanism held great sway. The proximity of Protestant theology in general, and Reformed theology more specifically, to new developments in philosophy has fascinated scholars and tempted many to paint a narrative of strong correlation between either Protestantism or Calvinism on the one hand, and philosophical transition from a Christian Aristotelian worldview to the mechanical philosophy associated with the rise of modern science on the other.

In his classic *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, Richard Westfall declared, “the Calvinist God in His remote majesty resembles the watchmaker God of the mechanical universe, suggesting that the Calvinist tenor of English theology helped to make the mechanical hypothesis congenial to English scientists.”¹ Likewise, Gary Deason argued in an essay

¹ Richard S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (New

“Reformation Theology and the Mechanistic Conception of Nature,” that Protestant Reformers’ “radical sovereignty of God” paved the way for mechanical philosophy in that “the Reformers’ view of God rendered Aristotelian essentialism pointless by denying that essences contribute causality or purpose to nature.”² Charles Webster also saw a “happy marriage” and “intrinsic compatibility” between “Puritanism and New Philosophy,”³ and stated, “Puritans as a whole felt that the ‘new philosophy’ was consistent with the reformed Christian faith.”⁴ More recently, Brad Gregory, following the suggestion of Amos Funkenstein, argues that “univocal metaphysical assumptions” of Protestants likely contributed to the “disenchanted natural world” brought about by modern science.⁵ Peter Harrison argues that Protestant literalist hermeneutics “entailed a new, non-symbolic conception of

Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 5.

- 2 Gary B. Deason, “Reformation Theology and the Mechanistic Conception of Nature,” in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 167-91, here 177-78.
- 3 Reijer Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), 143, in agreement with Robert K. Merton, “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England,” *Osiris* 4 (1938): 360-632, here 495.
- 4 Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626-1660* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), 498. See similarly, Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 217-23; Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 437-38; John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 128-32.
- 5 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 41. Cf. Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 70-72, on whom Gregory relies (*Unintended Reformation*, 5, 39, 55).

the nature of things” and this loss of symbolism in nature allowed for a “new scheme of things, [where] objects were related mathematically, mechanically, causally, or ordered and classified according to categories other than those of resemblance.”⁶

The kind of positive correlation between Reformed or Protestant theology and philosophical change argued by the aforementioned scholars is disputed by others. An exclusive Puritan or Reformed support for new philosophy is questioned by scholars who see a stronger correlation between English theological innovation and the philosophical innovation stemming from the phenomenon of “Latitudinarianism.”⁷ Recent scholarship has also shown that prominent English Reformed theologians, notably Thomas Barlow and Richard Baxter, were highly critical of the major mechanical philosophies of Pierre Gassendi and René Descartes.⁸ Arguments to the effect that Protestants

6 Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 114–15. Cf. Peter Harrison, “Hermeneutics and Natural Knowledge in the Reformers,” in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700*, ed. Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1:341–62, here 359: “In a sense, the stripping away of the inherent meanings of natural objects which was the consequence of the Protestant repudiation of allegory was paralleled in the sphere of natural philosophy by the evacuation of the inherent Aristotelian causes from matter.”

7 Frederic B. Burnham, “The Latitudinarian Background to the Royal Society, 1647–1667” (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1970); Barbara J. Shapiro, “Latitudinarianism and Science in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Past and Present* 40 (July 1968): 6–41; David S. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter and the Mechanical Philosophers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 35–43, 252.

8 Richard A. Muller, “Thomas Barlow on the Liabilities of ‘New Philosophy’. Perceptions of a Rebellious *Ancilla* in the Era of Protestant Orthodoxy,” in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*, ed. Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 179–95; Sytsma,

broke radically with analogical and symbolic approaches to reality and hermeneutics have been rebuffed by research demonstrating Reformed reception of Aquinas's doctrine of the analogy of being and Aquinas's biblical hermeneutics.⁹

The present essay will dispute a strong correlation between Reformed theology, as expressed in late seventeenth century English Puritanism, and philosophical transition associated with the so-called "new philosophy" of Descartes and Gassendi. I will argue that, at least among theologians of the Puritan (and nonconformist) tradition, suspicion and critique of new philosophy was characteristic until at least 1680, when the tide began to turn toward acceptance of new philosophy. After surveying the landscape of late seventeenth century philosophical transition among Puritans and nonconformists, I will address some common themes arising from a study of three representative Puritans: Richard Baxter (1615-1691), Robert Ferguson (c. 1637-1714), and Samuel Gott (1613-1671). These authors were actively engaged with philosophical change circa 1660-1680. In their works we find a continued affirmation, along with earlier Reformed scholastics, of philosophical eclecticism. We also find them opposing new philosophy and characterizing it as a revival of ancient philosophical error. Finally we find these Puritans

Richard Baxter, *passim*.

⁹ Richard A. Muller, "Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought," *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 14, no. 2 (2012): 127-50; David S. Sytsma, "Thomas Aquinas and Reformed Biblical Interpretation: The Contribution of William Whitaker," in *Aquinas among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 49-74.

presenting a range of objections to aspects of new philosophy, which they target as a threat to orthodox theology.

II. Puritan Theologians and Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Transition

From about the middle of the seventeenth century, as Cartesian and Neo-Epicurean ideas made their way into English academic circles,¹⁰ many Reformed theologians in the British Isles—particularly Presbyterians—gained a reputation for complaining about dangers associated with philosophical transition. During the Interregnum, English Presbyterians opposed to the incipient Latitudinarianism at Cambridge were credited with the view that “Philosophy and Divinity are so inter-woven by the School-men, that it cannot be safe to separate them; new Philosophy will bring in new Divinity; and freedom in the one will make men desire a liberty in the other.”¹¹ Worries about the detrimental effects of new philosophy persisted among British Reformed theologians until the end of the century. Sometime in the 1680s, Richard Baxter complained that his scholastic *Methodus Theologiae Christianae* (1681) was neglected by “ye multitude of younger students incapable of things very accurate & methodicall, (& cry-

¹⁰ Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 26–44.

¹¹ [Simon] P[atrack], *A Brief Account of the new Sect of Latitude-Men, Together with some reflections upon the New Philosophy* (London, 1662), 14, 22–23. Cf. John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53.

ing downe Aristotle & the Schoolmen to hide their ignorance of their Learning).”¹² In 1690 John Cockburn (1652-1729) lashed out at the “Narrowness of the Presbyterian Spirit” and wrote, “You may easily guess how squeamish they [Presbyterians] are about Points of Divinity, when they make the Cartesian, and other Systems of new Philosophy to be gross and damnable Heresies. So that if Presbyterianism prevail, all freedom of Spirit, all improvements of reason and knowledge will be banish’d...”¹³

Among the nonconformist heirs of the Puritans, the tide began to turn against traditional forms of philosophy and in favor of new philosophy in the 1680s, when nonconformist tutors can be found introducing Cartesian logic to impressionable young students. Beginning in the 1680s, the tutor Thomas Rowe (c.1657-1705) introduced his students to Cartesian Port Royal logic, attacked Aristotelian substantial forms, and adopted a Cartesian account of the soul as “Unextended Thinking Substance.”¹⁴ Rowe’s curriculum favorably disposed his most famous student, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), toward subsequent adoption of Cartesian and Lockean philosophy. Watts praised Rowe in an ode subtitled “Free Philosophy,”¹⁵ attributed the origin of his “freedom of thought” to reading Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*,¹⁶ and promoted the “corpuscular philosophy, im-

¹² Dr Williams’s Library, London, Baxter Treatises VII.229, fol. 68v [ca. 1683-1691].

¹³ John Cockburn, *An Historical Relation of the Late General Assembly, held at Edinburgh, from Octob. 16. to Nov. 13. In the year 1690.* (London: J. Hindmarsh, 1691), 48-49.

¹⁴ Mark Burden, “Academical Learning in the Dissenters’ Private Academies” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2012), 176-77, 223-24.

¹⁵ Isaac Watts, “Free Philosophy,” in *Works*, 6 vols. (London: John Barfield, 1810), 4:466.

proved by Descartes, Mr Boyle, and Sir Isaac Newton.”¹⁷

Although Rowe and Watts demonstrate a changing disposition toward new philosophy among a segment of nonconformity, their position generated controversy within nonconformist Reformed circles. Around 1700, Samuel Palmer remarked, “some [nonconformist] Tutors are more inclin’d to the Philosophy of Aristotle, others to the Cartesian Hypothesis, while my own had a due Regard for both, but strictly adhered to neither.”¹⁸ As a result of Rowe and likeminded nonconformist tutors, the English nonconformist tradition at the end of the century remained divided over its response to philosophy.

Against this backdrop of growing accommodation among the nonconformist heirs of Puritanism toward philosophical transition ca. 1680–1700, it is remarkable that in the period 1660–1680, we find a number of strong Puritan critics of new philosophy. Richard Baxter, beginning with his *The Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1667), launched polemics against the philosophy of Gassendi and Descartes in an appendix titled “The Conclusion, Defending the Soul’s Immortality against the Somatists or Epicureans, and other Pseudophilosophers.” He continued to warn against their philosophy in two of his major works, *A Christian Directory* (1673) and *Methodus Theologiae Christianae* (1681). His unpublished works – both correspondence and treatises – also contain sharply negative evaluations of new

¹⁶ Watts, Preface to “Philosophical Essays,” in *Works*, 5:500.

¹⁷ Watts, *Works*, 5:340.

¹⁸ Samuel Palmer, *A Vindication of the Learning, Loyalty, Morals, and most Christian Behaviour of the Dissenters toward the Church of England* (London: J. Lawrence, 1705), 23–24.

philosophy.¹⁹ Near the end of his life, in the year 1686, Baxter wrote in an unpublished manuscript, “You may call these men New Philosophers, or Cartesians, but for my part I shall take them for proved fooles, fitter for Bedlam than for a Schoole of Philosophy.”²⁰ Such unpublished remarks echoed his published opinion that Descartes and Gassendi “differ as much from true Philosophers, as a Carkass or a Clock from a living man.”²¹ In the final decades of his life, Baxter was clearly not pleased with the growing popularity of Gassendi’s revived Epicureanism and Descartes’ mechanical philosophy.

The displeasure of Baxter for Gassendian and Cartesian variants of mechanical philosophy was shared by two lesser known contemporaries, Robert Ferguson and Samuel Gott. Ferguson was a learned Puritan, who during much of the 1670s taught at the nonconformist academy at Islington and was close to John Owen, acting for a time as Owen’s assistant.²² Ferguson’s reputation was sufficiently great that while in the Netherlands in 1682 he wrote to his wife of the possibility of being appointed professor at a Dutch university, even suggesting that he “may have a pro-

¹⁹ Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, passim.

²⁰ DWL BT IV.87, fol. 233r. Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 69.

²¹ Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory: Or, A Summ of Practical Theologie, and Cases of Conscience* (London: Robert White, 1673), III, 919 (q. 173, §15).

²² Edmund Calamy, *An Account of the Ministers, Lecturers, Masters and Fellows of Colleges and Schoolmasters, who were Ejected or Silenced after the Restoration in 1660*, 2 vols. (London: J. Lawrence, 1713), 2:383; Mark Burden, “A Biographical Dictionary of Tutors at the Dissenters’ Private Academies, 1660-1729” (London: Dr Williams’s Centre for Dissenting Studies, 2013), 163-77, <http://www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/bd.pdf>; Burden, “Academical Learning,” 61, 89-90; ODNB, s.v. “Ferguson, Robert (d. 1714).”

fessorship at Franeker in Friesland, where Dr Ames was.”²³ One of Ferguson’s works, *The Interest of Reason in Religion* (1675), which is said to have been written under “Owen’s tutelage,”²⁴ contains sections with unfavorable evaluations of Cartesian philosophy.²⁵ Samuel Gott was a personal friend of Baxter, and although he served professionally as a politician in the House of Commons (1645–1648, 1660–1661), he also wrote religious and philosophical works. Among these works is *The Divine History of the Genesis of the World Explicated and Illustrated* (1670), which was praised by Baxter as having “many excellent notions .”²⁶ Gott’s *Divine History* includes a preface with a sharp critique of new philosophy.²⁷

Baxter, Ferguson, and Gott provide a useful representative sample of mainstream Puritan attitudes toward philosophy just prior to the 1680s when new philosophy gained a stronger foothold in nonconformist academies. We now turn to a thematic summary of shared assumptions, concerns, and critiques by these Puritans as they responded to the philosophical transition of the late seventeenth century.

III. Philosophical Eclecticism

²³ Burden, “A Biographical Dictionary,” 168.

²⁴ *ODNB*, s.v. “Ferguson, Robert (d. 1714).”

²⁵ Robert Ferguson, *The Interest of Reason in Religion* (London: Dorman Newman, 1675), 41–46, 248–67.

²⁶ Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 113. For a brief biography, see <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/gott-samuel-1614-71>.

²⁷ Samuel Gott, *The Divine History of the Genesis of the World Explicated and Illustrated* (London: E.C. & A.C. for Henry Eversden, 1670), 1–14.

As Richard Muller and others have argued, although the Reformed tradition often drew upon Aristotelian philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Reformed theologians generally viewed every philosophical sect, including Aristotelianism, as containing significant errors which required correction in light of revealed truth. Consequently, when Reformed theologians engaged with philosophy, they often advocated philosophical eclecticism, according to which the good parts of different philosophical sects were approved while the bad parts were discarded. Francis Turretin, for example, cited favorably the opinion of Clement of Alexandria: “Philosophy is not to be called Stoic, nor Platonic, nor Epicurean, nor Aristotelian, but whatever has been properly spoken by these sects—this, gathered into one whole, is to be called philosophy.”²⁸ Even when Reformed theologians adopted a largely Aristotelian perspective in their approach to philosophy, their eclecticism allowed, at least theoretically, for the incorporation of various philosophical opinions and criticism of Aristotelian opinions.

In addition, early modern Reformed theologians often cast their evaluation of philosophy in light of the opinions of competing ancient sects. As the above citation of Turretin illustrates, in this

²⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992-1997), I.xiii.6. The citation is taken from Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, I.vii. On philosophical eclecticism in the Reformed tradition, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:367-82; and Aza Goudriaan, “Theology and Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 27-63, here 35-41.

respect the example of the church fathers provided an important precedent for Reformed theologians, who were immersed in the fathers' hexaemeral commentaries on Genesis.²⁹ While philosophical eclecticism ensured that philosophical opinions remained subject to revision and critique, the reading of philosophy through the lens of classical sects from antiquity ensured that the options for philosophical revision would often be framed in light of ancient philosophical sects.

Baxter, Ferguson, and Gott all agree in general with the philosophical eclecticism characteristic of early modern Reformed theologians. Baxter finds problems with all the major sects of antiquity—Platonists, Pythagoreans, Aristotelians, Stoics, and Epicureans. Citing Colossians 2:8 and 1 Corinthians 2 (among other passages), Baxter states that all philosophical sects contain “much error, darkness, uncertainty and confusion” not only in their knowledge of God, but also in their understanding of logic, physics, and metaphysics. He therefore advises that the theologian distinguish the “certain and useful parts” from the rest.³⁰ When weighing philosophical sects against one another, Baxter echoes the early church fathers in finding the greatest problems with the Epicureans, who in Baxter's estimation were “justly the contempt of the sober sects.”³¹ Although he praises the method of Aristotle and the religious sentiments of the Platonists as relatively better than others,³² he still finds their philosophies to be

²⁹ David S. Sytsma, “Calvin, Daneau, and *Physica Mosaica*: Neglected Continuities at the Origins of an Early Modern Tradition,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 95, no. 4 (2015): 457–76, here 467–71.

³⁰ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, III, 907–8. Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 99.

³¹ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, III, 919. Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 100.

problematic, and specifically states that a “mixture of Platonick Philosophy with Christianity, made up most of the Primitive Hereticks” of the church.³³

Robert Ferguson shares similar sentiments with Baxter. Like Baxter, Ferguson believes that reason and philosophy are of great use to theology. Echoing familiar Thomistic language shared by Baxter and numerous contemporary Reformed theologians, Ferguson declares, “Revelation doth not cassate the use of our Intellectual Powers, but supposeth them; and by enriching them with discoveries which they could not by their own search have arrived at, perfects them.”³⁴ Among the truths of philosophy that faith presupposes are the principle of non-contradiction and the relation of cause and effect.³⁵

But Ferguson also argues that the actual historical sects contain notions opposed to theological orthodoxy, and so the concrete use of philosophy requires careful discernment on the part of the theologian. Drawing on the anti-Gnostic polemic of early church fathers, he writes:

I shall rather observe that the chiefest Errours that have infested the Christian Church, arose from a mingling Gentile Philosophy with the Doctrine of the Gospel. Both *Irenaeus* and *Tertullian* affirm the Errors of the *Gnosticks* to have sprung from the *Platonick Ideas*; Though I think it not

³² Baxter, *Christian Directory*, III, 919.

³³ Richard Baxter, *A Treatise of Knowledge and Love Compared* (London: Tho. Parkhurst, 1689), 2.

³⁴ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 20. Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 92–93.

³⁵ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 24.

improbable, but that their *συζυγίας* & *γενεαλογίας* took their birth from Pythagoreanism. The *Aeons* of the *Valentinians*, if we will believe *Tertullian*, were also borrowed from the *Idea's* of Plato...³⁶

The Pauline warning against philosophy (Col. 2:8), in Ferguson's opinion, had in mind Pythagorean and Platonist philosophy. Did then the later revival of Aristotelian philosophy "prove more friendly to religion?" asks Ferguson. His answer is emphatic: "No! The purity and simplicity of the Gospel, was no less corrupted by blending the Dogm's of Aristotle with the Articles of Faith, than it had been by mingling the Philosophy of Pythagoras and Plato with the Doctrines of Christ."³⁷ The problems introduced by medieval scholasticism touch both morality and faith by the blending of Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics. Ferguson echoes typical complaints against medieval scholasticism leveled by Reformed scholastics: the introduction of new terms, the accommodation of articles of faith to philosophical axioms, and the elevation of Aristotle's authority. On this point, insists Ferguson, he shares the general complaint against medieval scholasticism of "Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Calvin, and other Protestants," as well as "learned and sober Romanists."³⁸

³⁶ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 242–43.

³⁷ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 245.

³⁸ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 246–47. Cf. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:194–97; David S. Sytsma, "'As a Dwarf set upon a Gyants shoulders': John Weemes (ca. 1579–1636) on the Place of Philosophy and Scholasticism in Reformed Theology," in *Die Philosophie der Reformierten*, ed. Günter Frank and Herman J. Selderhuis (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012), 299–321.

Samuel Gott evaluates the ancient philosophical sects according to their relation to sense, reason, and faith. Going back at least to Lambert Daneau, Reformed theologians had argued for correcting philosophy based on these three epistemic sources.³⁹ According to Gott, the early philosophy of Pythagoras and Plato was heavily theological, and Plato “generally retained and refined this [theological] Philosophy.” Aristotle rejected “all Matters of Faith, both Divine, and Human, and examin[ed] all things only by Reason.” Epicurus, however, “departed from both these ways of Knowledg, regarding Sens more than either Reason or Faith.” Since philosophy requires all three sources (faith, reason, and sense) in order to construct a true account of the world, and all ancient philosophers lacked the “Divine Light of Faith,” they could not “produce any Complete System of the World, nor give any true and satisfactory Account therof.” The dissatisfaction resulting from this failure led to Skepticism, which consists of “a professed Denying or Doubting all things whatsoever: admitting no Testimony or Evidence either of Faith, Reason, or Sens.”⁴⁰

Gott criticizes the philosophers as all containing various errors inimical to theology. Greek philosophy was born on the soil of civilizations that worshipped the elements, and as a result ancient philosophers attributed eternity to the world. Aristotle was the “greatest Master of Reason among all Pagan Philosophers,” and his philosophy came closest to Moses.⁴¹ Even so, Gott thinks that

³⁹ Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 114-15; Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xi.3.

⁴⁰ Gott, *Divine History*, 2-3.

⁴¹ Gott, *Divine History*, 2-3. Zanchi also argued similarity between Moses and Aristotle, see Girolamo Zanchi, *Omnium operum theologicorum*, 8 vols. ([Geneva]: Stephanus Gamonetus, 1605), III, 217-24; Calvin Budiman, “A

Aristotelian philosophy often corrupted the interpretation of Genesis 1,⁴² and “that we may enjoy the benefits of their great Learning [Plato and Aristotle], and yet disengage our selves wholly from their Errors, we must reduce all their Opinions, and Human Inventions to this most Infallible Rule” of Scripture.⁴³

IV. New Philosophy and the Revival of Ancient Error

Given the eclecticism of our Puritan theologians, which sought to correct and improve philosophy by reference to sense, reason, and faith, we should not be entirely surprised to find some positive statements on new philosophy. Indeed, these Puritans find potential in recent mechanical philosophy for improving empirical knowledge of the natural world. Baxter recommends works of Robert Boyle and accepts Boyle’s corpuscularism as far as passive elements are concerned.⁴⁴ Acknowledging the empirical progress in his day, Baxter observes that “[a]lmost all Arts and Sciences are encreasing neerer towards Perfection. Ocular demonstrations by the Telescope, and sensible experiments, are daily multiplied.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Ferguson writes, “I readily grant that in reference to the solving the Phaenomena of Nature, there is more to be

Protestant Doctrine of Nature and Grace as Illustrated by Jerome Zanchi’s Appropriation of Thomas Aquinas” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2011), 71–72.

⁴² Gott, *Divine History*, 6.

⁴³ Gott, *Divine History*, 483.

⁴⁴ Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 140–44, 270.

⁴⁵ Richard Baxter, *The Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London: R. White, 1667), 351; cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 158.

said for the Corpuscularian Hypothesis, than for any other.”⁴⁶ Gott recognizes empirical improvements due to the invention of the telescope and microscope, and expresses “hope for more both Inventions and Additions” from the “happy Institution of the Roial Society.” He seeks an ideal philosophy in which such empirical or “Mechanicall Experiments” are done in conjunction with speculative philosophy informed by faith. Gott’s philosophical vision basically aims to update Christian philosophical speculation with new empirical data gathered by the Royal Society.⁴⁷

Despite their recognition of advancements made in the empirical observation of phenomena, these Puritans remain highly critical of central figures and concepts of the new mechanical philosophy. Moreover, they compare Descartes and Gassendi unfavorably with the ancient sects. Ferguson complains that Cartesians, although nominally for “free philosophy,” replace one tyrant (Aristotle) with another (Descartes). As far as theology is concerned, Ferguson views this change as generally for the worse: “I crave leave to say, that as the Cartesian Hypothesis is managed, it is like to prove as disserviceable to Religion, as any Philosophy hitherto entertained in the World.”⁴⁸ He goes on to argue that Cartesian doubt lays “a ground for Universal Skepticism.” Not only so, but Ferguson also charges that Cartesian doubt goes even farther than the suspension of assent, or ἐπιουχία, practiced by the Academic skepticism of Plato’s Old Academy.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 248.

⁴⁷ Gott, *Divine History*, 12.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 248.

⁴⁹ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 253, 255.

Both Baxter and Gott give greater attention to the parallels between new philosophy and ancient Epicureanism, which had witnessed a revival, especially at the hands of Gassendi, in the seventeenth century. Baxter views the similarities between the ancient Epicureans and Gassendi and Descartes as a cause for significant concern:

The Epicureans or Democratists, were still and justly the contempt of all the sober sects; And our late Somatists that follow them, yea and Gassendus, and many that call themselves Cartesians, yea Cartesius himself, much more Berigardus, Regius and Hobbes, do give so much more to meer Matter and Motion, than is truly due, and know or say so much too little of Spirits, Active Natures, Vital Powers, which are the true principles of motion, that they differ as much from true Philosophers, as a Carkass or a Clock from a living man.⁵⁰

Baxter clearly sees a danger in the elevation of material causes in philosophical explanation. He thinks that the consequence of inquiry focused increasingly, like the ancient Epicureans, on material causes would be a growing ignorance of natures or forms that constitute the higher order of reality. In fact, Baxter maintains that this kind of philosophizing was actually leading to neglect of the study of ancient philosophical sects in general, and ignorance of Aristotle and Plato among younger students in particular.⁵¹ In effect, Baxter argues that new philosophy asso-

⁵⁰ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, III, 919.

ciated with Gassendi and Descartes, with its sympathies for ancient Epicureanism, revives a problematic tendency toward materialism while simultaneously displacing those ancient philosophies—Platonism and Aristotelianism—that give greater weight to non-material realities.

Gott shares with Baxter many of the same concerns about the revival of Epicureanism. He sees a parallel pattern between the history of ancient philosophical sects and their subsequent reception in Christianity. Just as antiquity saw the emergence of Plato, Aristotle, and then Epicurus, Christianity is proceeding through periods shaped by Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. Platonism was initially refined by Christianity, leading to the later Platonism of the church fathers and the Neoplatonists, and this was followed by Christian Aristotelianism. The “last Age” in which Gott lives is “reviving and renewing old Errors, like Fashions, relaps again to Epicurism, in one kind or other, of Atoms, or Corpuscles, or the like.” Gott projects that this Epicurean age will last a similar length as the Aristotelian age before it, and when this new age exhausts itself, it will be succeeded by skepticism. “And when this Humor hath lasted as long as it did formerly, we may expect Scepticism to succeed: and indeed I suspect that we are already in the very Confines thereof.”⁵²

Gott laments this turn toward an Epicurean age. He is entirely aware that the major proponents of new philosophy are themselves Christians, but he nonetheless asserts that they are sowing

51 Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 102.

52 Gott, *Divine History*, 3.

the seeds of atheism. “And although I believ some of the Asserters thereof,” Gott writes, “to be as far from Atheism as my self, yet I must freely profess that the Assertion [of their novel doctrine of matter and motion] tendeth toward it, and was by the Heathens Improved to the Denial of a Creation.” He further states that a tendency toward atheism is what “chiefly...renders it [the doctrine of matter and motion] so acceptable and agreeable to the Corrupt Minds of Men,” and why so many writers feel a “need to tell the World they are no Atheists.”⁵³ In sum, Gott believes his life is witnessing the beginning of a regress into Epicurean errors which will lead in time to skepticism and atheism.

V. Specific Objections

During the second half of the seventeenth century, continental Reformed theologians expressed objections to a wide range of issues stemming from philosophical transition.⁵⁴ Our English Puritans reflect many of the same concerns relating to a range of epistemological, physical, and metaphysical topics. They specifically object to Cartesian doubt, both of sense perception and the existence of God, and Descartes’s proof for God’s existence. They also object to the Cartesian denial of final causes, new theories about souls and spirits, attacks on substantial forms and qualities, and the reduction of motion to local motion.

⁵³ Gott, *Divine History*, 4.

⁵⁴ Goudriaan, “Theology and Philosophy,” 43–53.

Sense perception of course was an important source of knowledge for Aristotelian philosophy. Reformed theologians typically agreed with Aristotelian philosophy on the reliability of sense perception for gathering knowledge, and as already noted, they identified sense perception as among the three faculties of knowledge (sense, reason, faith) corresponding to three kinds of things (sensible, intellectual, supernatural).⁵⁵ But they also defended the reliability of ordinary sense perception as something required by Scripture. As Turretin points out, Jesus appeals directly to the senses (Luke 24:39), as do the apostles (Acts 1:11; 1 John 1:1-2; 2 Pet. 1:17) and the angel at the empty tomb (Matt. 28:6).⁵⁶ Baxter and Ferguson specifically attack Descartes's doubt of the senses as undermining revelation which presupposes the reliability of sense perception. In opposing Cartesianism, Ferguson writes, "for without presupposing both that our Senses & Reasons do not universally deceive us, we can have no assurance that there is any such thing as a Supernatural Revelation at all. I would not say that the Cartesians are Skepticks, but I say, they owe it not to the principles of their Philosophy, that they are not so."⁵⁷ Baxter holds that "the certainty of sensation is a prerequisite for the certainty of faith," and considers himself "an Adversary to their Philosophy, that vilifie Sense." Doubt of sense perception, in Baxter's estimation, is generally conducive to infidelity.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See, e.g. Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xi.3.

⁵⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xi.6.

⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 256-57.

⁵⁸ See Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 88.

These three Puritans are also critical of Descartes's ontological argument for God's existence from the idea of God. Baxter dismisses "Cartesians and Cocceians" who "say that God and Angels, and Spirits, are but a Thought, or an Idea."⁵⁹ Gott dislikes the Cartesian assumption that "because the Operation doth indeed prove the Essence of the Cogitant, it did therefore also prove the Real Entity of any thing Cogitated." He further observes that Descartes seems to echo the similar argument of Augustine, and to that extent is derivative, yet Augustine was not burdened by the other philosophical problems of "Neophytes" like Descartes.⁶⁰ Ferguson likewise notes the derivative nature of Descartes's proof, and suggests it was simply taken from the scholastics and passed off as his own—"though in this, as in most other things, he was not so Ingenious as to confess at whose Breast he had Suckt, nor out of whose Gardens he had gathered his best Flowers."⁶¹ Ferguson specifically attacks Descartes's ontological argument as "little better than a Sophism; and to maintain an Article of such Import by a Medium, either Weak or Fallacious, is to betray the first Fundamental of Religion."⁶² In Ferguson's estimation, a posteriori arguments "fetch't from the Frame of Nature" are more easily "accommodated to popular Understandings," and provide better support for the existence of God. Moreover, a posteriori arguments follow the model of Scripture in directing the mind to the observation of the world

⁵⁹ Richard Baxter, "Epistle to the Reader," in *Poetical Fragments* (London: T. Snowden, 1681), A4v. Cf. Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 89.

⁶⁰ Gott, *Divine History*, 5.

⁶¹ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 45.

⁶² Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 41.

(Rom. 1:18-21; Ps. 19:1-6; Acts 14:15-17; 17:23-28; Job 12:7-10).⁶³

A unifying agenda underlying the mechanical philosophy of both Descartes and Gassendi was their denial of the Aristotelian concepts of substantial forms and qualities. They sought to replace the qualitative philosophy of Aristotle with a quantitative one in which matter and local motion provide the ultimate explanatory basis for unity and change. In this new vision, generally speaking, substances are unified not by shared essences (substantial forms) but by shared structures of parts, and the qualities attached to things are reducible to the arrangement of the material structure.

Both Gott and Baxter specifically resist a denial of substantial forms. Gott complains of “Young Wits led away into an Inextricable Labyrinth of Matter and Motion; and the Magnum Inane of Vacuity, and at last plunged into the Abyss of Perpetual Scepticism.”⁶⁴ He thinks that Christianity supposes essences when it differentiates between various natures (elements, vegetative, sensitive). Christianity also supposes qualities when it affirms the reality of virtue, vice, piety, and impiety. Gott argues that, logically, “by affirming Accidents and Qualities to be no Real things, they make both Virtue and Piety to be only Notions.”⁶⁵ Further, the Cartesian account of creation, according to which the diversified order brought forth from chaos is attributed to matter, motion, and figure, is in direct conflict with the Genesis account

⁶³ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 46.

⁶⁴ Gott, *Divine History*, 4-5.

⁶⁵ Gott, *Divine History*, 4.

of the six days, which on the contrary attributes diversity to the creation of various kinds of substances.⁶⁶ Gott obviously laments the growth of philosophy which builds an account of origins on rational speculation and gives little weight to the six days of Genesis 1. He sees the “Novell Doctrine of Matter and Motion” as logically tending toward atheism, because it gives credence to a vision of the world which in antiquity actually supported the repudiation of creation.⁶⁷

Although Baxter shares Gott’s resistance to discarding substantial forms, his position is both more nuanced and focused. Baxter is more nuanced in conceding that some elements may be better explained in a mechanical way through matter, motion, and figure. He thus distinguishes two kinds of form – passive and active – in which the former is largely mechanical and the latter consists of substantial form not reducible to the order of its parts. Baxter refers to active forms or active substances because this indicates a thing with its own principle of activity, such as fire, animal, or person.⁶⁸ Baxter vigorously defends active substantial forms against their denial by Descartes and Gassendi. He argues not only philosophically that substantial forms are necessary to account for diversity in the world and genuine secondary causality, but also theologically that the communication of God’s life, wisdom, and goodness with creatures supports the concept of intrinsically active substantial forms.⁶⁹ Baxter particularly fears

⁶⁶ Gott, *Divine History*, 5–6.

⁶⁷ Gott, *Divine History*, 4.

⁶⁸ Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 140–49, 163–69.

⁶⁹ Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 169–75.

the problems stemming from a denial of sensitive souls in animals. The application of mechanical philosophy to the sensitive soul, he believes, tempts people to think of the human soul as material. If an self-active thing like an animal can be explained in terms of matter and local motion, then why not the human soul? For Baxter, a complete materialism is therefore only a short step from the denial of substantial forms in animals.⁷⁰

Ferguson agrees with many of the same sentiments of Gott and Baxter with respect to the Cartesian doctrine of matter and motion. He sees both Descartes's denial of final causality and his account of the world arising from matter and motion as implying a denial of providence. According to Ferguson, the denial of final causes in natural philosophy implies "that all things are the effects of Fate or Chance, and that there was no design nor Counsel in the production of them." By contrast, Ferguson thinks that, given that God created the world in his infinite wisdom, the end for which God created things "ought to be the prime consideration in our speculations of the fabrick and nature of things."⁷¹ Ferguson also takes issue with Descartes's view of the origin of the world, according to which,

[A]ll the Phaenomena of the Universe might arise out of Matter by meer mechanical Motion, and that Matter alone, supposing such a degree of motion communicated to it, and the Laws of motion established, could have produced the Sun, Moon, Starrs, Plants, Animals, and the Bodies of

⁷⁰ Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 202-15.

⁷¹ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 249.

men in such Organization, Order, Beauty, and Harmony,
as now they are.⁷²

Descartes, in Ferguson's estimation, attempts "to solve all the Phaenomena of Nature secluding any Immediate influx of Divine Providence." Furthermore, although Descartes himself built his theory of laws of motion on the theological foundation of God's immutability,⁷³ Ferguson believes that his philosophy could easily be stripped of its theological trappings by making both matter and motion self-sufficient, thereby serving the cause of atheism. Descartes's doctrine, according to Ferguson,

...seems wonderfully to befriend the Atheists, for if all that which we observe in the World, supposing the Existence of matter and Motion, might result from the meer laws of mechanism, I do not see but that persons Atheistically disposed, may goe a degree farther, and affirm both the self-existence of matter, and that motion was appendent to it: its Idea no more excluding motion than it includes Rest.⁷⁴

Descartes had denied the Aristotelian notion that there is an inherent principle of rest in bodies.⁷⁵ With his latter remark

⁷² Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 250.

⁷³ René Descartes, *Principia philosophiae*, II.36, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 13 vols. (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897–1913), VIII, 61. Cf. Sytsma, Richard Baxter, 177–78.

⁷⁴ Ferguson, *Interest of Reason*, 250.

⁷⁵ Descartes, *Principia philosophiae*, II.25–27.

Ferguson therefore intimates that just as Descartes excluded rest from the concept of bodies, one might just as well view mechanical motion as inherent to matter. This small change in perspective would facilitate a transition from a theistically grounded mechanical universe to an atheistic mechanical universe by replacing divinely imposed mechanical motion with materially derived mechanical motion. What Ferguson appears to be saying is this: once the world is conceived as a wound up clock, it is both a small and a tempting step to conceive of the world as self-winding.

VI. Conclusion

Our sampling of the opinions of three representative Puritans ca. 1660-1680 allows us to draw the following conclusions. First, the assumption, prevalent in much older literature, of a “happy marriage” and “intrinsic compatibility” between “Puritanism and New Philosophy”⁷⁶ requires revision. Although more work remains to be done to flesh out the details of the relation of Puritan and English Reformed theology to seventeenth-century philosophical transition, we can at least point to a significant degree of hostility and suspicion toward the new philosophy represented by Descartes and Gassendi until at least 1680. While contradicting generalizations in the secondary to the effect that “Puritans as a whole felt that the ‘new philosophy’ was consistent with the

76 Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science*, 143.

reformed Christian faith,”⁷⁷ this study gives credence to later seventeenth-century witnesses who claimed Puritans or Presbyterians were often hostile to new philosophy. To the extent that later English nonconformists and American Puritans embraced the doctrines opposed by Baxter, Ferguson, and Gott, this later development points to significant discontinuity within the history of Puritanism.

Second, this study highlights the importance of philosophical eclecticism as a foundational assumption among Puritan critics of new philosophy. These Puritans inherited an approach to philosophy which affirmed that grace presupposes and perfects nature, and nonetheless all philosophical sects are subject to error. This model of the relation between theology and philosophy requires theologians to draw on philosophy as a handmaiden to theology while also discarding the incompatible parts. Hence the same theologians feel justified in criticizing both Aristotle and Descartes at different points, while drawing positively on both Aristotelian philosophy and new empirical knowledge gained from telescopes and microscopes.

Third, in evaluating philosophy these Puritans assume that in harmonizing the truths of philosophy and theology, supernatural revelation has a right to judge philosophical knowledge where they both speak to the same issue. This assumption leads them to oppose Cartesian doubt of the senses as incompatible with the credibility given the testimony of the senses in Scripture. Likewise, they disagree with a Cartesian theory of the origin of

⁷⁷ Webster, *Great Instauration*, 498.

the world from matter and motion as contradicting the testimony of Genesis 1. Ferguson, in particular, also dislikes Descartes's ontological argument for God's existence since Scripture generally points readers to the observation of creation.

Finally, a historical sensitivity of the contribution of philosophy to the growth of heresy and false doctrine beginning in the early church leads these Puritans to suspect that the uncritical adoption of philosophy in the present will lead to heresy in the future. Both Ferguson and Gott suspect that skepticism and atheism will eventually follow upon the introduction of the doctrine of matter and motion set forth by Descartes and the revived Epicureanism of Gassendi. Baxter is not far removed from their conclusion in that he suspects new philosophy will lead to materialism and the denial of the immortality of the soul. Baxter, Ferguson, and Gott certainly all agree that the emergence of Cartesian and Neo-Epicurean philosophy does not bode well for theological orthodoxy. Baxter perhaps captures the fear of all three when he frankly warns, "I think that in this age, it is one of the devils chief designs, to assault Christianity by false Philosophy."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Baxter, *Reasons*, 588.

[초록]**신(新)철학에 대한 청교도의 비판
(약 1660-1680년경을 중심으로)**

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청교도주의는 종종 현대 과학 및 철학과 강력하게 연결되어 있는 것으로 여겨졌다. 이 논문은 그 반대의 증거 즉, 적어도 1660-1680년의 기간에 몇몇 청교도들은 데카르트 및 피에르 가쌍디와 연결된 “신(新) 철학”에 대체로 적대적이었음을 보여주는 증거를 제공한다. 그 기간에 리처드 백스터, 로버트 퍼저슨, 새뮤얼 고트가 쓴 저작들을 탐구해 보면, 적어도 1680년까지 청교도들 사이에서는 신(新) 철학을 의심하고 비판했던 것이 유행이었음을 알 수 있다. 이 논문은 청교도주의와 17세기 철학적 변화들의 일반적인 관계성을 다룬 다음에, 백스터, 퍼저슨, 고트의 작품들을 하나로 묶어주는 공통된 주제들을 드러낸다. 이 세 사람은 철학적 절충주의를 지지하며, 신(新) 철학의 문제 있는 개념들의 등장을 고대 오류들의 부활로 해석하며, 신(新) 철학이 함축했던 신학적 문제들에 대해서 구체적인 반대들을 제기했다.

키워드: 청교도, 데카르트주의, 기계론적 철학, 무신론, 리처드 백스터, 로버트 퍼저슨, 새뮤얼 고트

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