

LEONARDO COIMBRA AND THE "RENASCENÇA
PORTUGUESA:" THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF "CREATIONISM"

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Introduction: The Context

During the first half of the 20th century the Portuguese intellectual scene was dominated by three movements: *Renascença Portuguesa*, *Seara Nova*, and *Integralismo Lusitano*. *Renascença Portuguesa* was the first to make its appearance, emerging shortly after the monarchy finally had given way to the new Republic of Portugal. Concerned not only with guaranteeing cultural continuity despite the radical changes in politico-legal structures, but also with providing a strong aesthetic response to the increasing dominance in Portuguese intellectual life at the turn of the century of Positivism and Evolutionary Naturalism, *Renascença Portuguesa* made considerable impact on Portuguese thought and literature, but had virtually no influence on the nation's political life. Dissidents who were motivated by a deep concern for the directions which the nascent Republican form of government was taking, formed what might be considered a splinter group in 1921 under the direction of Raúl Proença and Antônio Sérgio, a group that took the name of its journal, *Seara Nova*, and repudiated much of the *Renascença Portuguesa's* efforts at identifying the essence of historical Portuguese culture. Meanwhile, the opposition politico literary movement, *Integralismo Lusitano*, linked ideologically to *Action Française* of Charles Maurroas, had made its appearance in 1914, under the leadership of Antônio Sardinha who, in the words of the literary historian, Fidelino de Figueiredo, "initiated that modern movement of revision, if not of inversion, of national history, as a basis for a politics of organic and corporative traditionalism."¹ *Integralismo Lusitano* was to become a potent force on the political scene as the century progressed, its political ideals becoming institutionalized in Salazar's Constitution of 1933 which established the "Corporative Republic."

Without a doubt, the leading figure in *Renascença Portuguesa* was the poet and man of letters, Teixeira de Pascoães (1878-1952). Four books which he wrote between 1912 and 1915 set the direction of the movement, their titles revealing that direction: *O*

espírito lusitano, ou o saudosismo (1912), *O Génio Português* (1913), *A Era Lusitana* (1914), and *A Arte de ser Português* (1915). The key term was *saudade*, that one word in the Portuguese language which, more than any other, defies translation, that is captured in the music and lyrics of the popular song form *Fado*, that refers not only to memory and longing, but also to a sense of alienation and *Angst*. The task of defining and refining *saudade* became crucial to the poets and critics who clustered around Teixeira de Pascoães in the Portuguese Renaissance movement, and "saudosismo" became a synonym for "Renascença Portuguesa." Leonardo Coimbra called Teixeira de Pascoães "a metaphysical poet."² "In Pascoães," he wrote, "there is action and contemplation and a special representative sensibility."³ It was Coimbra who took the term and showed how it could be used as a concept within a metaphysical system. Indeed, Leonardo Coimbra (1883-1939) became known as the philosopher of the *Renascença Portuguesa* and did not hesitate to identify himself with its fundamental goals: first, to react against the narrow scientism of 19th century Positivism and Evolutionary Naturalism, and emphasize the importance of the aesthetic and religious dimensions of human experience; and second, to provide an ideological foundation for the new Republican chapter of Portuguese history which would preserve the historic roots of Portuguese culture, while providing for the continued vitality of that cultural tradition, and placing it in touch with the mainstream of European intellectual history. Coimbra attempted to do all this by working primarily within the field of epistemology which he considered fundamental to any serious philosophical enterprise. Antônio Sérgio had accused him, and the entire *Renascença Portuguesa* movement, of being anti-intellectual and obscurantist, but Coimbra's reflections on epistemology should be sufficient to render the criticism invalid. If anything, Coimbra is open--at least in his earliest writings--to the criticism that he was unable to free himself sufficiently from the positivist mentality to provide a radical criticism of its basic tenets.

Part I: Coimbra's Epistemology of "Criacionismo"

Leonardo Coimbra worked out the lines of his epistemological position, which he called "Creationism," slowly, and with considerable revision along the way, through a series of volumes and articles, most notably three books: *O Creacionismo; esboço de um sistema filosófico* (his thesis entered in the competition for an Assistant-Professorship in the Faculty of Letters at Lisbon in 1912), *O Pensamento Creacionista* (a commentary on the basic

themes of the first work, 1915), and *A Razão Experimental* (the mature revision of his position, 1923).

The analysis of any act of knowing or consciousness reveals two elements or dimensions which seem to be irreducible one to the other: the subject, or more properly speaking, the subjective dimension; the object, or more accurately, the objective dimension; that which is given in and to consciousness, and the conscious act of receiving the datum. However, the content of scientific consciousness is not a mere datum, but rather the result of constructive elaboration, a historical moment in an on-going epistemological process. The problem with traditional epistemological analyses lies in the postulation of permanent elements. Empiricism describes a process whereby the image of an external object is obtained by a subject. All three elements are "fixed" or "static:" image, object, subject. In epistemologies of formal *a priorism*, such as Kantian criticism, eternal and fixed forms are imposed upon form-less intuitions of sensation. The analysis of moments of knowing, however, reveals no static elements, either subjective or objective, but rather a subject-object relationship which constitutes part of a continuing process of organization in which the formal and the material elements are found to be indissolubly united. They "invade" each other, to use Coimbra's figure of speech, thereby constructing knowledge.

"Notion" is the central category of Coimbra's epistemology, and one is tempted to refer to "notions" as the "building blocks" of knowledge, but Coimbra rejects such a mechanistic, or architectonic, figure in favor of a more organic or vitalistic image. Thought is an activity of synthesis which never occurs in a vacuum, but is a process of constructive dynamism--"creationism" is the word Coimbra had coined to refer to the process--in which the material and formal are unified dialectically through a succession of enveloping notions. The dialectic is a synthesis of reason and intuition resulting in *notions*. But *notions* are themselves only stages in an on-going process, each notion a partially elaborated synthesis. And each intuited *datum* proves to be already the result of a partially elaborated synthesis. Thus the dialectic of thought or knowledge is, at any point in its history, a dialectic of notions, postulated through the process of knowledge, and never the dialectic of *things*, whether subject-things or object-things.⁴ There is a tendency for reason, in any moment of its progression, to immobilize the process, overlooking the intrinsic mobility of notions, and reifying them, transforming them into extra-experiential things. Coimbra declared that "the *thing* is the major philosophical sin"⁵ and referred to the "thingifying vice" (or the "vice of reification") which transforms mobile notion into

immobile things and brings the knowledge process to a premature halt. He sees his "*creacionismo*" (creationism) as standing over against "*coisismos*" ("thingisms"), the traditional epistemologies which assume the existence of extra-experiential entities.

In creationist epistemology, the dialectic of knowledge takes as a point of departure the notions of abstract number, space, and time, and proceeds to the formulation of the notion of life, then of consciousness, and finally of person. Corresponding to each of these major notions is a particular scientific discipline which concerns itself with the description of a specific level of knowledge by the elaboration of auxiliary notions: mathematics, physico-chemical sciences, biological sciences, psychology, and sociology. The disciplines and their fundamental notions, are not reducible one to the other; they are rather cumulative in the developing process of constructing knowledge of the universe. Hence "matter" is a necessary notion in the process of formulating the notion of "life," yet the notion of "life" is not a mere accident of "matter," but a primary reality capable of self-existence. It is through the epistemological comprehension of the notion of matter that we come to understand the notion of life. Life is not reducible to matter, nor is life derived from matter, but the notion of life is the result of the continuing dialectic of thought, which proceeds from the notion "matter," itself a "partially elaborated synthesis." To explain "life" solely in terms of "matter" is to reduce "life" to "matter," thereby absolutizing "matter," and stagnating the "dynamism of constructing thought," blocking its "incessant dialectical and creative activity."⁶

In the earlier works, Coimbra viewed the *notions* which were formulated in the process of knowledge as possessing certainty, universality, and truth, although only if they were not reified, but considered merely as dialectical moments of thought. In *Experimental Reason*, the concept of dialectical thought becomes one of hypothetical constructive thought. This had special implications for the relation between science and philosophy. In the earlier view, in addition to analyzing the epistemological process whereby scientific knowledge is generated, philosophy concerns itself with the Spencerian task of relating the knowledge of the several sciences into an integrated whole, becoming the "science of generalities." In *Experimental Reason*, Coimbra examines and evaluates five possible functions of philosophy in relation to the sciences: (1) Philosophy as Criticism, the Kantian approach which investigates the conditions making knowledge possible, and delineates the limitations of that knowledge; (2) Philosophy as a Science of Generalities, the Spencerian approach which limits philosophy to the task of synthesizing the results of

the several sciences; (3) Philosophy as an originating process of knowledge which differs from the scientific, and represents a radically independent mode of knowing, the Bergsonian effort to deal with the intuition of concrete duration and the inner experience of liberty; (4) Philosophy as an organ of freedom, the postulation of ends having in view the external modification of nature, or the internal modification of the person, with the Spinozan analysis of human bondage and human freedom as an archetype of this function of philosophy; and finally (5) Philosophy as the correlation of theory and praxis in experience, the task of what Coimbra calls "experimental reason," in which the theory formulated by a science, understood to be a product of human activity, is synthesized with human ends or purposes.

This last function of philosophy, which Coimbra himself adopts, is that of testing theory in practice, and simultaneously formulating theory through praxis. The result is not merely verification of theory, nor technological application of theory. Experimental reason which incorporates into itself synthetically the formalism of pure deduction and the empirical contingency of induction, reveals itself as hypothetical-constructive activity capable of constructing a tridimensional universe into which are synthesized the notions of matter, life, and memory. "Our activity of synthesis," he writes, "leads us to ultimate constructions, as implications of reality, which the philosopher makes coherent and explicit. . . through theory of knowledge, through analysis of the sciences, and through art and morality - the relations between the real and the efficient ideal, i.e., that which is being realized."⁷ At this point, the epistemological process not merely enables us to know what is, but to know what is capable of being. "Creationism" is not merely the formulation of notions that can be used for the construction of scientific theories which explain our experience, but also the formulation of ideals that can be used for the guidance of human practice which determine our destiny.

In 1921, in a study of Antero de Quental's thought, Coimbra noted that human experience is much more complex and rich than the experience addressed by the sciences, which neglect altogether the moral, aesthetic, and religious dimensions. Yet, apart from moral, aesthetic, and religious considerations, scientific explanation of human experience lacks significance and a sense of direction or purpose. "As a result," he wrote, "the experience with which the sciences deal can be only material to be assimilated by the broader human experience, because the former needs to be grounded in the latter's sense of direction, meaning, and richness."⁸ It becomes the task of philosophy, then, to serve as a mediator between the sciences, rigorous in their methodological processes, and delimited

in terms of subject matter, and a transcendent sphere where one seeks for being and for knowing, the source of significance, and the motivation for activity designed toward the realization of ideals. That transcendent sphere is designated in *Experimental Reason* as the ultimate realm of *mystery*, viewed as the ground of being, open only to metaphysical lyricism or to artistic--and especially poetic--articulation.

Part II: Art (Poetry), Religion, and Philosophy

Metaphysical lyricism merely strives speculatively to penetrate the mystery. The continuing epistemological process of constructive synthesis of notions cannot rise above the notion of persons. It is an effort to comprehend fully, human experience, and that experience is, after all, *human*. To rise above the notion of human persons, or the pluralism of social dialogue, to the formulation of a more encompassing notion is possible only if one proceeds in the direction of pantheism, but the pantheistic notion is one which is not dynamic, but ultimately stultifying. He turns, then, to artistic expression, and notably poetry, to find the means whereby the human spirit is capable of penetrating the mystery.

In an article on "Poetry and Modern Philosophy in Portugal" which he published in 1917, he wrote, "Philosophy, without imagination, . . . loses itself in abstract systems of logic (and) suffocates in bourgeois positivism, and, turning new eyes toward poetry, recaptures imagination; smiles, meditates, and sings."⁹ He goes on to characterize poetic thought as fundamentally "anti-thingist," through its use of imagination and creative imagery, "socially pluralistic" through its communication through non-conventional use of language, and "humanistic" in its evocation of anxieties and aspirations which are overlooked, and even destroyed, by scientific theories. Concerning the latter function he wrote:

"This ideal of precise scientific knowledge is accomplished. . . at the cost of removing from the human that which is essentially human, from each individual that which is specifically individual, . . . In effect, the more science dehumanizes the universe, the more humanism remains residually for art and philosophy to receive. Art, exploring it (the essentially human) in all senses, guards and revives all the anxieties which always animate it (the human)."¹⁰

And so poetry is capable of revealing to us, "in living action" to use Coimbra's phrase, the metaphysical presuppositions of Portuguese culture, or of any other culture. Ultimately, that metaphysics is one which is Pantheistic, but not the abstract, stultifying pantheism of metaphysical lyricism. "That pantheism," he wrote, "because it is poetic, is not an abstract unity, a dialectical totality, but merely the emotive direction to which humans incline themselves. It is not an absorbent, paralyzing Unity, but the unity of love through the communication of souls."¹¹

The expression of moral and aesthetic experience through poetry only indicates the spiritual dimension of human experience which does seem to point to a mystery which is impenetrable even to metaphysical lyricism and poetic expression. That dimension cannot be overlooked. In *Experimental Reason*, he declared that "the true philosopher, as a tree relating to its roots, after meditating in silence, raises his voice in song and prayer, which constitute the flower and the ascension, the lyrical outpouring of his spirit."¹²

It was not until 1935, when he published his final work, *Russia de Hoje e o Homem de Sempre*, that he opted for revelation as the sole means of penetrating the mystery, although this is not, properly speaking, a penetration, but an opening-up of the mystery. The revelation is accepted as authentic in Christian revelation, since it alone opens up the historical dimension which characterizes the positions of Creationism and Experimental Reason, and avoids the dehumanization and de-individualization of the pantheistic vision. History is an intrinsic element in Christian revelation: God incarnate in time, revealing in that fashion the true nature of the human, viz., to be the principal agent, and unifying center of history. Christian revelation is the most complete humanistic philosophy, best explaining the human's place in the universe and incorporating the basic concerns of human persons. This does not negate the importance of epistemological process, scientific theory, or artistic expression, but permits the articulation of an ontology of the human spirit which, through dialectical synthesis, can integrate all the manifestations of being, opening up the way toward comprehending the "hierarchical ordering of realities." Science is integrated into the final synthesis with all that it contains that is valid, revealed as "the love of experience and the profound and unshaking conviction of an *order* to nature"; art is seen to be the expression of the human spirit as it directs itself toward the harmony of ends, the aspiration of the perturbed harmony of today toward the fullness of harmony of tomorrow. The Divine, which serves as the most complete notion, incorporates into itself, without negating all the other notions which

have resulted from the continual dialectic of the epistemological process. The ideals which motivate human praxis, both individual and social, are given through the inspiration of artistic and religious experience, and the function of revelation is that of providing the conviction that the creation of beauty and love, the worlds of art and morality, is grounded in the nature of the universe itself.

Part III: The Opening-Up of Revelation

An important question remains: What is the nature of that which is revealed to us? Is it a notion, in a sense the notion of notions, the final synthesis of the epistemological process which experimental reason is incapable of formulating by itself, or is it an extra-experiential thing--the Divine Itself which in Cartesian-like fashion can provide the ground for a complete synthesis of reason and intuition by serving as the reified source of both? Either would seem to be unsatisfactory. The concept, "divinity," belongs to metaphysical lyricism and lacks the historical dimension--in fact denies that dimension--which is central to Christian revelation. On the other hand, the revelation of a reified divinity, even were it a personal, rather than impersonal, deity would lead, as any reification of notion leads, according to Coimbra, to an absolutism and, in this case, the most dangerous absolutism of all, whether of atomism, psychologism, sociologism, or political totalitarianism, viz., religious absolutism.

It is probably preferable to take him at his word. The core of Christian revelation is the human being, the individual person incarnate in nature and living in history--aborning, living, interacting with other persons in society, suffering, and dying. Through this, each of us comes to see the true historical nature of his or her own nature. The God-in-Christ was in history, seemed to be a victim of that history, and yet proved to be an agent of history, imbuing history with meaning, but not without extreme suffering and sacrifice.

Conclusion

The question of originality--so often raised by Portuguese commentators and critics--is irrelevant for our purpose. Influences are recognizable, beginning with the positivists, and including, among others, Bergson and Blondel, Husserl, Scheler, and Heidegger. What is important are his contributions to *Renascença Portuguesa* and the development of Portuguese philosophic thought

in this century. These are three in number:

- 1) An effort to go beyond Positivism to include serious concern for the moral, aesthetic, and religious dimensions of human experience without divorcing the scientific from these dimensions;
- 2) Through the notion of dialectic synthesis, an effort to incorporate scientific knowledge into Portuguese culture, overcoming the unfortunate dichotomy between the sciences and the "humanities";
- 3) A strong protest against all closed systems and an insistence upon dialectical pluralism and dialogue.

Notes

- 1 *Literatura Portuguesa* 359.
- 2 "São Paulo de Teixeira de Pascoães," *Museum* 1 1934: 18.
- 3 "Regresso ao Paraíso," *Águia* v. 1, n. 2 1922: 54.
- 4 *O Criacionismo* 3.
- 5 *O Criacionismo* 5.
- 6 *A luta pela imortalidade* 26.
- 7 *Razão Experimental* 382.
- 8 *O Pensamento Filosófico de Antero de Quental* 112.
- 9 *Atlântida*, VII 25, 224.
- 10 *Regresso ao Paraíso* 61.
- 11 *Poesia e Filosofia* 224.
- 12 *Poesia e Filosofia* 83.