The Scientific Concept of Later Neoplatonism

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In the later Neoplatonism, natural science is fundamentally a theology, its origin and rationality of the basis, direction and final destination are gods. This concept represents the philosophical reflection of science by the Greeks, which inevitably has the limitations of the times, but it may provide a kind of enlightenment for today’s “modernity problem” and help us to understand science more deeply.

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In the later neoplatonism, science, in addition to the pursuit of reason, rigor and clarity, contains religious and mystical dimensions, as well as religious theology, which is a different branch of a tree trunk. It is not a man’s conception of nature, but, at a more fundamental level, a manifestation of heaven taught by supernatural gods and based on god’s rationality, a means of revealing the ineffable (i.e. god) hidden behind the present.

However, if we grasp this difference and ask the source of the scientific idea of later neoplatonism, we will find that behind the religion-science theory that later neoplatonists are committed to building is the same reflection as today: over time, the ills of science are becoming more and more clearly exposed, and it is observed that the traditional ethical order maintained by religion is being more and more strongly impacted by scientism. Science, while demonstrating the power of human beings, is gradually dispelling the moral norms of traditional society, destroying people’s places of life, making people feel at a loss, in such a situation, where should science go? In this regard, neoplatonists seeking ways to reconcile and complement modern thought and ancient tradition may provide us with a reference to correct the opposition between science and traditional ethics in modern thought and certain extremes that radicalize all traditions as the dross of “feudal” or “despotism”, and use our “science” to prove “confusion” and “superstition” of the ancients.

I. Philosophical Reflections of the Greeks on Science

In the scientific concept of later neoplatonism, science and theology are inseparable. They are two different aspects of the same thing, but why did the later Neoplatonists try to reconcile the two forces, science and theology that are often regarded as opposite? In my opinion, Greece’s eclectic reflection on science reflects a rift between the new and the old, the rapid development of science based on reason follows that the gradual decline of religious positions, but science was not strong enough to take over all human affairs. It can be said that this eclectic idea is the Greek efforts to save traditional religions, but it is also progressive thinkers to integrate new science into people’s lives.

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Since the 5th century AD, the rapid development of commodity production in the Mediterranean civilization circle, the fast development of commodity exchange and military needs, greatly promoted the development of natural science, and then the Hellenistic countries and the Roman Empire through various means to further consolidate this situation, the depth and breadth of scientific development is unparalleled in any period since the Bronze Age. The new astronomy represented by Anaxagoras and Aristarchus gives the celestial body a completely physical interpretation, while it denying celestial divinity, it denied the existence of traditional gods (the sun god, the moon god and other celestial gods) either, The medical sciences of Hippocrates destroyed the idea of God as the cause of disease. As can be seen, the natural sciences made more and more remarkable achievements in all aspects, gradually seizing the position of religion, but it also caused a tremendous spiritual crisis and terrible moral decline. As dramatist Aristophanes shows in Cloud: rising scientific ideas destroy traditional ethics and distort humans’ justice consciousness. Strepsiades, a father who listens to the new science, was beaten by his son and returned to the traditional gods in dismay. Plato also pointed out that this atheist science undermines ethics and morality. “If the gods don’t exist, they can do whatever they want, without worrying about the discovery of bad things” (Republic 365e).

In order to save the ancient system of religion-ethics and restore the role of religion and traditional principles in social life, some philosophers began to try to reconcile the two opposing forces, the natural science and religious theology, and to construct a scientific theory that compromises science and theology. The later Neoplatonism, which integrated all Greek theories of science, philosophy and theology, was the final form of the eclecticism that connected science with theology as specialists have shown (Bowman, Cameron & Garnsey, 2005).

II. Science in Theological Perspective

In the age of the later Neoplatonists, the centuries-old social crisis and the intermittent civil war in the Roman world finally ended. The new economic, social and political order was gradually established in the ruins of the old slavery empire. It led to the revival of hope in the present world, got people out of the negative negation of the natural values like Gnosticism and early Neoplatonism. For Iamblichus, the founder of later Neoplatonism, the real world is not a cage and prison full of sin, as described by Plotinus, Porphyry and Gnosticism, but an orderly and aesthetic whole, which is the most direct proof of god’s existence and most perfect work of gods. This worldview further gives the later Neoplatonists a theological vision of nature, it can be concluded that the later Neoplatonism’s scientific doctrine, which closely links science with theology, is born out of this worldview, which closely links nature with god and regards nature as theophany.

For the later Neoplatonists, the meaning of science lies not in the science or nature itself, but in its external function of communicating the human being and the gods. As early as in Republic, Plato has sketched out a scientific picture with theological implication: science forces the mind to look up and leads the soul to rise to the real world, the truth is only here. The later Neoplatonism compromised this doctrine with the mysticism of Pythagorean and ancient Egypt, and further exploited the theological factors. For example, Iamblichus equates the “real world” in the Republic with the picture of heaven depicted in Egyptian religion, and interprets the “real world” as “the realm of gods”, giving scientific significance religious ethics.
For later Neoplatonists, Science is, in the first place, an intermediate being that involves divine, (it is not a subjective construct but an objective “being”; man is a “discoverer” of science rather than a “creator”), it is between the invisible realm of super-rationality (i.e. “real world”, “realm of gods”) and the visible real world, and connecting them into a whole, it is the reflection of the eternal sacred world reflected in the ordinary world, and the path to the sacred world of the decadent ordinary world (Shaw, 2014).

Iamblichus stressed that God exists in all things, permeates and dominates all things, and connects them with himself:

The notion (in mythology) that God dwells only in the heavens is never true, Gods dwells forever in every thing.(DM30, 1-3)

God’s only light extends to every corner, and through its universal power that runs through all things, he leads everything to perfection by virtue of his own wireless virtue and fundamental transcendence, and all that he reigns over, even the last, is therefore connected with their principles (DM31,13-18) (des Places, 1966).

Therefore, in the real world, the echoes of God are everywhere, and God is in these echoes and imprinting, to reveal themselves to mankind. The later Neoplatonism believed that the scientific study of nature is fundamentally the way for human beings to grasp this revelation. If the power of science is used correctly, man can open the door to the sacred world, and then initiate a mysterious religious experience that allows one to cross the barrier between the common world and the sacred world, to grasp directly the pure existence of super-rational nous (i.e. Gods) hidden behind the earthly things, and to experience the existence of god by “meet with god”. Later Neoplatonists maintain that it is just the fundamental task of science.

For example, by means of mathematics, one is able to recognize the grandeur and harmony of the universe created by god, and thus catch a glimpse of the gods standing behind the universe, feel god’s incredible power. In this state of awe of god, one is most clearly aware of one’s own insignificance and god’s greatness, and then spontaneously turns to god, attracted by god, who at the same time lovingly walks out of hidden mist, and takes the initiative to meet the godly people in one body, thus realizing a mysterious experience of meeting with god namely henosis, according to the later Neoplatonists. Only this kind of inspired mysterious experience can truly grasp God and truth, science is a mediator to trigger this mysterious experience, and to successfully reach this experience, it is necessary for science to obey God, fear God, and need science to be based on theology.

In addition, in some ways, the late even equate science with theology directly, such as Iamblichus citing the pythagorean doctrine, declaring that “every number is a god”, while Damascius believes that geometry is the body of god, such as the triangle that incarnates the god Athena, and the square that incarnates the god Hermes.

According to later Neoplatonism, science would lose all its meaning if it were to be detached from this theological vision, Proclus wrote in his commentary to Timaeus:

Timaeus is considered the most veritable celestial scientist (27a4), not because he studied the speed of celestial motion, or because he measured the sun’s motion with an astronomical map, nor because he took the time to explore the object of celestial bodies, but because he directed celestial science beyond the heavens, as Teatade (173 e6 below) put it, because he pondered the real invisible causes of celestial bodies. (Festugièrè, 1966, p. 261)

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1 In this paper, all paragraphs cited De Mysterii this paper are based on Edouard des Places, Jamblique. Les mystères d’ Egypte. (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1966), and their codes are indicated in accordance with academic practice.
In the text Proclus distinguishes between two different disciplines, one that places science under the light of theology, the other that merely looks at the natural phenomenon itself as a representation, examines the world in a mechanical, purely physical way, and narrows that this is the meaning of the world. In the eyes of later Neoplatonists, the former is the true science, the latter sees mountain is mountain water is water, it is regarded as a manifestation of immersion in the life of the senses, and is no different from living in debauchery, it is no slightest benefit for people, but keeps people away from happiness and truth.

He has always stressed that science and theology are by no means incompatible. The pseudo-science, which is attached to nature itself, is the antithesis of theology. On the contrary, true science can not be decoupled from faith, for all knowledge comes from the same source, is taught by a single god, and is based on one only god. As a result, this idea of knowledge is bound to lead to a different path between theology and science from the perspective of later neoplatonism, and there can be no fundamental contradiction between them, for the source and basis of all knowledge: god is always right and will never wrong.

III. Conclusion

The scientific ideas of later Neoplatonism deeply influenced the world through Christianity and Islamic mysticism, which encouraged people to find proof of faith in science and provided a way for dialogue and integration between religious theology and science. This idea directly prompted christian and islamic bishops to accept Greek science, allowing the fire of science to survive in the middle ages when everyone was a religious man, and to make science prosperous again through the “Neoplatonism fever” of the late middle ages, As Copernicus extolled in The Operation of Celestial Bodies: “If there is a science that can make a man noble and free from the filth of time, it must be astronomy. For when man truly sees all the solemn order of the universe under God’s control, he must feel a motive that drives man towards a standard life, to practice all kinds of morals, and to see from all things that the creator is indeed the source of truth, beauty and goodness” (NCCW, I, 1) (Czartoryski, 1972 ). With the world changes, Neoplatonism’s scientific concept is endowed with more and more rich connotation. Religion which increasingly modern today, is calling for the dialogue between theology and science, and the later Neoplatonism is a millennium bridge between the two, for non-religious people, the scientific concept of later Neoplatonism is also worth learning from, it tells us that science should still take moral ethics as the boundary, moral ethics as the destination, it also provides a paradigm of seeking the harmony between tradition and modern science, inspires us to re-focus on tradition in nowadays, with the rapid development of science and technology.

References