

Introduction

In this book an attempt is made to tell the story of the teaching and writing of philosophy by those who pursued their vocation in pastorates, or in Dissenting academies and Nonconformist theological colleges (of which there were well over one hundred in the period under review) because their religious convictions excluded them from the Anglican-Oxbridge establishment. A bald summary of highly intricate matters will set the scene.

The continuing influence of the medieval idea of the unity of the realm was thrown into relief by Henry VIII's disengagement of the English Church from that of Rome. The conviction was fostered that an important constituent of the cement of national unity was religious uniformity. Hence the attempts to secure such uniformity by legislation – attempts stoutly resisted by the Separatist harbingers of English Dissent. In the wake of the Civil War, and under Cromwellian rule, the lot of Dissenters was easier, but reaction against them set in with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The times were politically and religiously turbulent, and once again the authorities sought religious uniformity as the mainstay of national unity. To this end a series of five measures, known to Dissenters of the period as 'the five-thonged whip', found their way to the statute books. The Corporation Act of 1661 barred Nonconformists (Roman and Dissenting) from holding civil office. Between 1660, when the Convention Parliament's Act restored sequestered clergy to their livings, and 1662, and speeded by the Act of Uniformity of the latter year, some two thousand clergymen left, or were ejected from, their livings because they could not in conscience give their 'unfeigned assent and consent' to the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England. The Act applied also to schoolmasters and university teachers, and among the ejected in the latter category was John Owen, Dean of Christ Church, and formerly Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. There followed the Conventicle Act (1664), which prohibited religious meetings of five or more persons over the age of

sixteen (other than members of the same household); and the Five Mile Act (1665), which was designed to separate ejected ministers from their former pastorates by imposing penalties upon any of them who resided within five miles of any corporate town, or of the place in which they had formerly ministered. The provisions of the First Conventicle Act were reinforced by those of the Second, in 1670.¹

If the Act of Uniformity excluded Dissenting teachers from the ancient universities, the university statutes effectively excluded Dissenting students; for at Oxford all entering students were required to subscribe to the doctrines of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, and all members of that University were prohibited from having relations with any Dissenting societies. Some degrees at Cambridge were open only to those who were members of the Church of England, while other degrees were awarded only upon the candidate's subscription to the articles of the Thirty-sixth Canon of the Church of England.²

Under the circumstances described, the earliest Dissenting academy tutors lived dangerously. Richard Frankland, for example, threatened by the penalties of the Five Mile Act, migrated with his academy (1669-1698) on no fewer than five occasions between 1683 and 1689.³ The arrival of William of Orange in 1688 was, however, soon followed by the enactment of what has come to be known as the Toleration Act of 1689 – despite the fact that the term ‘toleration’ appears neither in the title of the Act nor anywhere in the text. Without repealing earlier adverse legislation, the Act provided that the penalties attaching to the earlier laws would no longer be imposed upon orthodox Protestant Dissenters (the concession was denied to Roman Catholics, Socinians and Jews). Hence, although they continued to be barred from civic office, and were subject to numerous other restrictions, orthodox Protestant Dissenters were now in a position to worship freely, to organize their religious life, to open meeting-houses, and to do all of this legally and under the protection of the law. In particular, Protestants who assented to the doctrines of the Thirty-Nine Articles (with a concession to Baptists on their doctrinal *raison d'être*) could now provide openly for the higher education of their young. They thus began to establish more permanent academies for this purpose, and philosophy was among the disciplines for which they made provision.

It is well at this point to utter a cautionary word. Those who were trained in philosophy when the conviction widely prevailed that the discipline comprised nothing more than ‘talk about talk’, and who have not been able to modify this opinion, will simply have to swallow hard when turning to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For here almost anything goes. Philosophers, many of them divines, will discuss all

manner of questions, sometimes out of deep interest, frequently because they are spurred on by controversy, and – not least in the Dissenting academies and Nonconformist colleges – because of a shortage of teachers and/or of funds. The more philosophically talented eighteenth-century tutors would glide elegantly from logic to metaphysics to ethics to theology and back again, and even the less gifted were expected to familiarize students with all of these fields. Their efforts were generally worthy, their results sometimes unfortunate. Nor was the need of polymaths soon over. When in 1804 John Pye Smith delivered his inaugural lecture at Homerton Academy (1730-1820), he listed the subjects he intended to cover: natural philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, natural history, logic, ontology, philosophy of the human mind, composition and rhetoric, history, mathematics, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English.⁴ Two years later he assumed the duties of the theological chair. All of which seems awesome, especially when one recalls reports (no doubt malicious and ill-founded) of some in our own time who experience difficulty in keeping one chapter between themselves and their students in one discipline. Our awe must be tempered, however, by the realization that the post-Renaissance explosion of knowledge was in its adolescence, our modern disciplines had yet to receive their now-familiar shapes,⁵ and the progressive eighteenth-century person was expected to have a nodding acquaintance with many things. But deeper than the matter of personal interest, or the requirements of controversy, or the shortage of teachers, many Dissenters would have endorsed the words of Thomas Barnes at the opening of the Manchester academy in 1786:

Of all subjects, DIVINITY seems most to demand the aid of kindred, and even of apparently remoter sciences. Its objects are GOD and MAN: and nothing, which can either illustrate the perfections of the one, or the nature, capacities, and history of the other, can be entirely unimportant.

But how extensive a field do these subjects open? Natural Philosophy, in its widest sense, comprehending whatever relates to the history or properties of the works of Nature, in the Earth, the Air, the Ocean, and including Natural History, Chemistry, &c. has an immediate reference to the one – and to the other belong, all that Anatomy and Physiology can discover relating to the body, and all that Metaphysics, Moral Philosophy, History, or Revelation declare concerning the mind. But here again the field still opens upon us. For History, as well as Revelation, demands the knowledge of Languages; and these again, of Customs and of Arts, of Chronology and

Manners – the stream of science still branching out into more and wider channels. And to the highest furnishing of the mind are necessary, those subjects which belong to cultivated Taste, which regulate the Imagination and refine the Feelings, and which give correctness to vigour, and elegance to strength.⁶

In a word, those who were seriously concerned with the ways and works of God and humanity, and who wished to provide a university-level education to those otherwise excluded from it, could not consistently balk at a curriculum which ran over the entire field of available knowledge.

Less loftily, there was a widespread conviction in educated circles that philosophy was an important part of a person's intellectual equipment, though some evangelicals, among them the Anglican John Newton, who proffered advice to William Bull on the setting up of Newport Pagnell academy, were wary of the subject on the ground that too much free enquiry could unsettle the faithful. On the other hand, in *A Lecture Introductory to the Study of Philosophy, delivered in Cheshunt College, Herts, November 14, 1838* (1839) the evangelical Independent, Joseph Sortain, contended that philosophy would not only cultivate the minds of intending ministers but would assist them in demonstrating their points in preaching. Lest it be thought that conservative evangelicals alone were suspicious of philosophy we may cite the case of Gilbert Wakefield (1756-1801). In 1790 he was appointed classical tutor at the liberal Hackney College (1786-1796), having previously held a similar post at Warrington academy (1779-83). where he proved to be a 'troubler of Israel'. In 1791 he published a tract in repudiation of public worship;⁷ he taught Greek without accents, 'against which he was as violent as he was against the Trinity';⁸ he declared that systematic doctrinal teaching produced 'a harvest of *theological coxcombs*,'⁹ and he lamented that 'in these institutions young men are dosed with such infusions [of metaphysics, morals, history and politics] to a degree that makes even the strongest stomach regurgitate under the operation.'¹⁰ Wakefield resigned before he had completed his first year at Hackney, and he was, to put it mildly, atypical.

If the position of philosophy in the academies and theological colleges was sometimes precarious either on principle or because of a dearth of teachers, there is more than enough evidence to show that the subject was taught more often than not (though there may be a gap, unperceived by subsequent generations, between what a syllabus specifies and what is actually taught). It is also clear that some at least of the tutors were philosophically active, and a handful of them distinguished, in publishing terms.

So to the plan of this book: in the next chapter we shall consider the place of philosophy in the eighteenth-century academies. Those tutors and alumni who published philosophical works will be introduced as we proceed, except that we shall reserve to chapter three our treatment of moral philosophy – a prominent concern of a number of Dissenting philosophers. Chapter four will comprise an account of the place of philosophy in the Nonconformist colleges from 1800 to 1920. As with their eighteenth-century predecessors, we shall note the varied philosophical writings tutors and alumni, but on this occasion holding over our consideration of both moral philosophy and apologetics to chapter five. In chapter six some brief concluding remarks will be offered.

It would be quite unrealistic to attempt a detailed discussion of every published item; indeed, to be frank, some contributions do not merit more than a passing reference. Rather, the objectives here are first, to indicate the place of philosophy in the academies and colleges (a difficult enough task given the paucity of information at a number of points); and secondly, to indicate the variety and range of philosophical interests espoused by Dissenters and Nonconformists. In other words, this survey represents an attempt to answer the question: What was done in the name of philosophy teaching and writing by the tutors and alumni of the Dissenting academies and Nonconformist colleges of the period 1689 to 1920? It will be noted that throughout this book we are concerned with Dissent/Dissenters and Nonconformity/Nonconformists *and philosophy*. That is to say, we are not here concerned with *The Philosophy of Dissent* (to borrow the title of a book of 1900 by the Methodist T. Courtenay James) in the sense of specific Dissenting principles *vis à vis* the Church-state question. This, it seems to me, is fundamentally a theological question, and as such I have sought to discuss it elsewhere.¹¹

It must be confessed that in narrative terms this study is far from being a seamless robe. By this is meant first, that quantities of material regarding academies, colleges and the place of philosophy in the curriculum range from the ample through the adequate to the non-existent, and this not simply because some institutions enjoyed a longer life than others. Secondly, with respect to the philosophical works by tutors and alumni, these vary greatly in scale, value and theme; and some philosophy tutors published little or nothing in that field. Accordingly, our account of the course of philosophy in Dissenting and Nonconformist circles in chapters two and four below, though broadly chronological, will be somewhat jerky, for we shall speak of the place of philosophy on the curriculum, introducing the tutors and (where they exist) their works (other than their ethical and apologetic contributions) as we come to them. Thus narrative will from time to time be interrupted

by exposition. In chapters three and five there will be a greater unity of theme, and more of a sense that there is an ongoing conversation in which Dissenting and Nonconformist philosophers are participants. Thirdly, there is an almost complete hiatus in the story at the end of the eighteenth century, when a number of Dissenting tutors died and, for that and other reasons, a number of academies closed. Old Dissent required new institutions and new tutors as the nineteenth-century opened, and, after a certain amount of sanctified reluctance, the Methodists decided that they needed such establishments and personnel for the first time.

As to the influence of the tutors on the discipline and on their students: here again the picture is mixed. Whereas Isaac Watts's *Logic* was used until well into the nineteenth century; whereas Richard Price initiated a discussion of freedom and necessity among Dissenters and others; whereas in the nineteenth century George Payne's *Elements of Mental and Moral Science* passed through a number of editions and was referred to by his peers, frequently the philosophers worked independently on themes in ways quite unrelated to the thought of their immediate contemporaries within or without Dissent and Nonconformity. As for the tutors' influence upon their students: while we shall read some fulsome tributes as we proceed, we may not unjustifiably surmise that if Thomas Amory was greatly indebted to his uncle Henry Grove, and if A.M. Fairbairn's vision inspired many, not all tutors (Richard Price among them) excelled in the classroom, and the majority of students (the eighteenth-century non-vocational academies apart) were more likely to regard themselves as budding pastors than as aspiring philosophers. It is not unkind to suppose that of these a proportion, then as now, displayed a remarkable facility for excising Hume, Kant and the rest from their memories between the final examinations and the award of the leaving certificate. Insofar as influence can be negative, we may, for example, note that among the idealist philosopher Edward Caird's most searching critics were his former students, the Congregationalists Robert Mackintosh and A.E. Garvie.¹²

As we go forward we shall do well to remember that much of the education provided was done on a shoe string; that tutors were frequently required to cover enormous amounts of territory in both arts and divinity and even – more especially in the eighteenth century – in classics, science and mathematics; that some of the tutors held pastorates concurrently with their teaching duties, and even those who did not were normally expected to preach far and wide in the churches; that prior to the spread of popular education their entering students frequently had only the slightest grounding in basic disciplines; and that proposed amalgamations

of colleges seldom met with ready approval.¹³ In a word, given the circumstances, the wonder is that philosophy received as much attention as it did, and that those teachers who produced books and articles in the field managed to put pen to paper at all.¹⁴

A final introductory question remains: Why this study's terminal date of 1920? In the first place, with the opening of Oxford and Cambridge universities to Nonconformists and the increasing use by Nonconformists of the facilities of the then new universities – especially London and Manchester and, later, Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham and Nottingham, the Nonconformist denominations no longer had to supply ministerial personnel and funds for all of the teaching required by their students. Secondly, with the general laicizing of the theological disciplines it was no longer necessary that philosophy be taught by Nonconformist ministers, or even by Christians; though, as it happens, a leaven of ordained philosophers has been found in the secular universities since 1920.¹⁵ In view of these developments, it is not altogether surprising that the amount of philosophical writing undertaken by Nonconformist theological college teachers has declined. Nor, in view of the overall reduction in Nonconformist church membership during the twentieth century, the higher average age of ordinands in recent years, and the determination in some quarters to 'professionalize' the ministry (philosophy sometimes being an early casualty – as if the attempt to wrestle with the problem of evil, for example, were not a clamant *pastoral* necessity), is it surprising that few of today's ministers (unlike a number of Nonconformist lay persons)¹⁶ regard philosophical writing as part of their calling.