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## Cudworth, Ralph

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### **Title\***

Cudworth, Ralph

### **Dates and places of birth and death\***

Born: 1617, Aller (Somerset)

Died: 26 June 1688, Cambridge

### **Abstract\***

Ralph Cudworth was an expounder of 'Cambridge Platonism'. His main tenet is that natural phenomena cannot be explained only by the principles of mechanism, therefore, the existence of a 'plastic nature', which orders the world in accordance with divine decrees, has to be postulated. The order of creation, in turn, does not depend only on divine will but also on the essences present in God's intellect. These essences can be known through the notions innate to human soul, which recollects them by means of its active nature. On this basis, Cudworth opposes the Calvinist and the Hobbesian voluntarism, for which divine will is the only source of natural and moral laws. Hobbes is also attacked as a main expounder of atheism, which Cudworth traces back to the idea that matter alone is the source of any activity and phenomenon. To this idea, Cudworth opposes an argument of the existence of God that foreruns Locke's.

### **Biography\***

Cudworth was born in 1617 in Aller (Somerset), by Ralph Cudworth the elder, fellow of the Emmanuel College of Cambridge, and was educated by his stepfather Richard Stoughton, another fellow of the College. In 1632 he was admitted there as pensioner, and took his BA in 1635 and his MA in 1639. As a student, Cudworth was acquainted with Calvinist theology and with Scholastic philosophy dominating the milieu of the Emmanuel. Moreover, he was introduced to Platonism by his tutor Benjamin Whichcote (Scott 1994, 140-143), whose circle was characterized by anti-Calvinist positions inspired by the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (Carter 2010a, 100-102). In 1639 he became fellow of the Emmanuel, while in 1647 he gave a sermon at the House of Commons and became Regius Professor of Hebrew and Master of Clare Hall. In the following years he obtained the doctorate in divinity (1651) and became Master at the Christ's College (1654). During the Interregnum (1649-1660) he was favoured by the patronage of Cromwell's secretary of state, John Thurloe, and was consulted by Cromwell on the re-admission of the Jews in England. He held his position at Christ's College also during the Restoration, and in 1678 he became prebendary

of Gloucester. He died in Cambridge in 1688. The main work published during his life was the *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), while his *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731) and *Treatise of Freewill* (1838) appeared after his death. Cudworth was the father of Damaris, known as Lady Masham. (Birch 1820; Hutton 1996; Hutton 2013; Hutton 2015, 148-158).

### **Innovative and original aspects**

Together with Whichcote, Henry More and Anne Conaway, Cudworth was part of the Cambridge Platonists, as he used various Platonic-inspired theories in his philosophy. His overall aim was to counter Hobbes's and Spinoza's materialism, atheism and determinism, which he traces back to the perversion operated by Protagoras of the atomism of Moses (Cudworth 1996a, book II; Hutton 2008, 147-148) and to the Stoics (Cudworth 1996b, ch. 2-3; Sellars 2012). The main tenet of his *Intellectual System* is that the phenomena of motion cannot be accounted for only in material terms, i.e. by the principles of mechanism. They are explained by the Platonic-inspired hypothesis of 'plastic nature', which is both an immaterial substance and the summation of the laws of motion by which God teleologically orders the world. This notion discards the idea of a direct action of God on the world (Cudworth 1964, ch. 3; Jacob 1991; Cunning 2003; Allen 2013; Hutton 2013; Russell 2008, 148-150; Bergemann 2012). It also bears witness of the Stoic notion of pneuma, although Cudworth rejects the idea that plastic nature is conscious of itself, as it was for the Stoic conception (Gigliani 2008). To this regard, Cudworth introduced the modern English notion of 'consciousness' as the awareness of thoughts and actions (Thiel 1991; Thiel 2011, 67-71; Carter 2010b). The idea of plastic nature would later be used by Jean Le Clerc to criticize the atheists, and would be attacked by Bayle as it excludes the knowledge of its ends (Le Clerc 1703-1713; Bayle 1737; Simonutti 1993 and 1997; Rosa 1994).

Secondly, in the *Intellectual system* Cudworth addresses the atheism of the materialist positions. He distinguishes between four forms of atheism: hylozoic (or "Stratonical", as Spinoza's), cosmoplastic (or "Stoical"), atomist (or "Democritical", as Hobbes's), and hylopathian: the main kinds being the hylozoic, according to which matter is alive (as in the cosmoplastic hypothesis), and the atomist, for which matter is brute (as in the hylopathian, based on forms rather than on atoms) (Cudworth 1964, ch. 2; Armour 2008; Russell 2008, 148-149; Gigliani 2008). In order to refute atheism, Cudworth develops an argument anticipating Locke's: since something exists from eternity, and it cannot be matter (which has no power to create particular things), God is the eternal being (Cudworth 1964, ch. 4; Scribano 1989; Russell 2008, 113-119).

The problem of determinism is dealt with in the *Treatise of Freewill* and in the *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*: to Hobbes's determinism Cudworth opposes the idea of *to hegemonikon*, i.e. the power of self-determination which is the very principle of individuation of the self (Cudworth 1996b, ch. 16; Hutton 1996), and which he appropriates from Alexander of Aphrodisias (Sellars 2012). Moreover, he criticizes Hobbes' idea of justice as based on convention instead of on a natural justice that precedes God's will (Hutton 2015, 132-133). This criticism entails an attack to the Calvinist theory of the absolute inscrutability of divine will (Passmore 1951, 11-14; Carter 2010a, 100-102; Carter 2011; Atfield 2008), undermining the possibility of morality and of knowledge (Hutton 2001a). Cudworth opposes to voluntarism a theory of morality and knowledge based on Platonic innatism and on the principles of archetype (model) and ectype (copy): in the same way as the world is a copy of a divine model, ideas (including moral principles) are copies of divine ideas or essences, which are before divine will and are recollected by the mind in virtue of its active power (Cudworth 1996a, book 4; Scott 1994; Armour 2008; Hutton 1996). On this basis, Cudworth's idea of morality has been labelled as 'rationalist' in 18<sup>th</sup>-century debate between rationalists and sentimentalists, although he admits both the role of reason and passions in motivating right behaviour (Cudworth 1969; Darwall 1995, 109-148; Gill 2004; Hutton 2001b).

**Cross-References (if there are any; please include a list of other entries in this encyclopedia**

**that may be of further interest to your readers.)**

Alexandrinism (in the renaissance)  
Cambridge Platonists  
Conway, Anne  
Arminius, Jacobus  
Imitation and Mimesis  
Atomism  
Hobbes, Thomas  
Will, Free  
Neoplatonism  
Atheism - Renaissance Philosophy  
Plato (in the Renaissance)  
Calvinism - Renaissance Philosophy  
Substance - Renaissance Philosophy  
World Soul  
Spinoza

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