

**A SHORT SKETCH OF
MODERN
PHILOSOPHIES AND OF HIS
OWN SYSTEM; PP. 1-40**

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A Short Sketch of Modern Philosophies and of His Own System; pp. 1-40 by Antonio Rosmini-Serbati

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Rosmini
A SHORT SKETCH

OF

MODERN PHILOSOPHIES

AND OF HIS OWN SYSTEM,

BY

ANTONIO ROSMINI-SERBATI.

WITH A FEW WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

BY

FATHER LOCKHART.

LONDON.

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A FEW WORDS OF INTRODUCTION.

It often happens that I am asked to say in a few words what is the characteristic principle of the system of philosophy named after Rosmini, the venerated Founder of the Order to which I have the honour to belong.

The following Short Sketch of Modern Philosophies, written by Rosmini forty years ago, but only recently published in the Italian original, seems well suited to the above purpose. I commend it to all who wish to know what Rosmini's system is, but who have not time or inclination for studying it in his larger works; or who perhaps have only heard Rosmini spoken of as one against whom much opposition has been raised by many Catholic writers, especially by Italian members of the Jesuit Order.

On this point it may be well to say a few words. Many accusations having been laid before the Holy See against Rosmini as a theologian and philosopher, Pope Pius IX., appointed, in 1850, a special Congregation to examine and report on his works. A most searching examination was instituted of more than three years duration, made by twenty-four Consultors of the Index, all bound under oath to study thoroughly all the inculpatated works, independently, without consultation with others, and in relation to the charges, more than three hundred in number, that had been

brought against them. In the month of June, 1854, Pius IX. presiding over the assembly of the Cardinals and Consultors of the Index, and having heard the all but unanimous verdict of acquittal, pronounced the following Decree: "All the works of Antonio Rosmini Serbati, concerning which investigation has recently been made, must be dismissed;* nor has this investigation resulted in anything whatever derogatory to the good name of the author, or to the praiseworthiness of life and singular merits before the Church of the Religious Society founded by him."† To this DECREE was added at the same time the following PRECEPT OF SILENCE, "That no new accusations and discords should arise and be disseminated in future, silence is now for the third time enjoined on both parties by command of his Holiness."‡

* The Congregation of the Index is empowered by its constitutions to pronounce one of three sentences, "*pro merito*" (according to deserts), on works submitted to its examination—viz., *prohibeantur*, *corriganantur*, *dimittantur*, so that the sentence of *dimittantur* or dismissal is the most favourable sentence ever given, and means that nothing has been found in the works demanding prohibition or correction, but that the works are dismissed and left free to be read by the faithful.

† The Decree: *Antonii Rosmini-Serbati opera omnia de quibus novissime quæsitum est, esse dimittenda; nihil que prorsus susceptæ istiusmodi disquisitionis causæ auctoris nomini, nee Institutæ ab eo Religiosæ Societati de vitæ laudibus et singularibus in Ecclesiam præmeritis esse direptum.*

‡ The Precept of Silence forbids the bringing up again the charges which had been dismissed after so searching an

Being myself in Rome in the early part of the year 1854, a little before the sentence of acquittal on Rosmini's works, I one day received a visit from the English Assistant of the General of the Jesuits, who informed me in the course of conversation that he had been sent expressly by the General to assure me, and through me the Superiors of our Institute, that the General wished it to be understood that "the opposition to our venerated Founder was not the work of the Society of Jesus, but of a School in the Society."

I have always treasured these words, because they assure me that the opposition on the part of those writers, which is as active as ever, notwithstanding the *Precept of Silence*, is not to be understood as committing a venerable Order, for which I feel so high an esteem; between which and ourselves I feel sure there will one day be a perfect harmony of views on the subject of philosophy, since we are agreed in taking S. Thomas as our master. We may differ with those writers in some of their interpretations of S. Thomas's meaning, but we both recognize in the Holy See an infallible umpire if ever it should declare any philosophical opinions to clash with any principles of Catholic Doctrine.

A few remarks on the fundamental principle of investigation. *Ne vel nova in posterum accusationes ac dissidia, quoris demum obtentu suboriri ac disseminari possent, indictum est jam tertio de mandato Sanctissimi utriusque parte silentium.*

Rosmini's philosophy may not be out of place. This concerns the origin of ideas in the human mind.

Now the preliminary difficulty in understanding the Rosminian philosophy is that it goes deeper than what are *popularly* assumed to be the first principles of human thought. It undertakes to *account for* ideas. But to many people it has never occurred that there is any difficulty in this matter requiring explanation. They have been used to assume with Locke and others, more or less of the same school, that the formation of ideas is so simple that it does not require to be accounted for. It is assumed to be a simple fact like sensation. They say, "We *have* sensations, and we *have* ideas; the sensations come first, and they are transformed into ideas by the faculty of reflection."

Those who talk thus are not aware that between *sensations* and *ideas* they have jumped a gulph which is not less than *infinite*!

This mental condition reminds me of a conversation once overheard in a railway carriage between two countrymen. "John," said the one, "how about this railway telegraph; how do they send messages by it?" "Oh," said the other, "it is very simple. You see them wires along the line. They runs from Lunnon to York. They are fastened to a thing at each end with a dial plate and hands to it like a clock, with letters all round, and when they turns the hands in Lunnon this 'n and

that 'n, the hands in York goes that 'n and this 'n." "Ah," said the other, "it seems very simple when you have it explained."

Much like this is the state of mind of those who do not see any difficulty in the formation of ideas, and serenely talk, as Locke and his school do, of "sensations being transformed into ideas by means of the faculty of reflection." They ignore the crucial point in philosophy,* much like the countryman who explained the electric telegraph, omitting all mention of electricity—that occult and mysterious force which is behind the phenomena.

The fundamental principle of Rosmini's philosophy concerns, as I have said, the origin of ideas—how the *ideas* or *thoughts* of *things* arise in our mind. For, it is certain that whenever that modification of our sensitivity which we term a sensation takes place, we immediately and necessarily think, not of the sensation *within* us, but of a something *outside* of us to which we attribute *existence*, call it a *thing*, and credit it with being the *cause* of our sensations; so that we actually attribute to it the qualities of heat or cold, blackness, whiteness, or the like, which, when we reflect or think again, we know exist within our own sensitivity only.

* Every *sensation* is *particular*; *reflection* simply reproduces the *particular*, *imagination* pictures it; but ideas are *universal*, and all involve the idea of existence which is the most universal of all. How do we get the *universal*?