

Political and Philosophical Thought in the Antebellum Era

(this review is continued from the Political and Philosophical Thought of the Colonial and Revolutionary Eras)

The Counter-Revolution in America (1800 – 1850):

“No sooner had America reached its apogee in brilliance than a conservative reaction set in – political, religious, moral, and philosophic. The liberal stream of the Enlightenment was overwhelmed by a conservative undercurrent, which now rose to the surface.” (Kurtz, *American Thought Before 1900*, pp. 22)

A. Southern Racial Aristocracy (1800 – 1860):

An immediate reaction against the **Declaration of Independence** was stimulated by a fear of “the mob” inspired to some extent by the **Jacobin** excesses of the **French Revolution**. The south was unable to reconcile itself to **Jeffersonian democracy**. Is the principle **all men are created equal** defensible, or does it rest on untenable metaphysical grounds? There rose a group of men, dedicated to defending the status quo of the Southern way of life – which included the institution of slavery and the economic interests that it supported. Attacked were the notions of liberty, equality, natural rights, democracy, and strong federal government. **John C. Calhoun** (1782 – 1850) was the most serious southern philosophical writer of this period, denied that there were **natural rights** prior to society – such rights were metaphysical abstractions – and he attempted to defend a hierarchical and organic conception of society. Order and security, rather than scientific reason or democratic reform, were to be valued and preserved.

B. Academic Philosophy – Scottish Realism (1800 – 1850):

A similar conservatism was evident in religion in the early nineteenth-century. The **radical deistic** spirit of the **Age of Reason** was lost in the general subservience of science to religion. The earlier confidence in the powers of human intelligence was replaced by a failure of courage and a sense of human dependence. Remarkable during this period were the numerous scholarly attempts to rationalize received traditions and values.

Colleges played a big role in promoting these ideas – the purpose of many colleges was to provide moral discipline and an ordered conception of the universe. The college thus had the conservative function of preserving a cultural tradition and, in effect, of justifying the **status quo**.

Realism was based on the doctrine that “real objects” existed independently of man and were perceivable as such. Real objects were neither unknowable nor reducible to phenomena or ideas. All of this seemed self-evident and give to inductive intuition. The realists believed that such intuition might establish moral, political and religious truths – indeed, all fundamental truths could be known in the same way. There were self-evident certitudes of right and wrong, standards of justice and injustice, truth of God’s existence and of immortality of the soul, mathematical objects, and basic scientific universals. This method could be extended indefinitely and was conveniently used to instate a whole set of orthodox ideas and values, giving them sanction of philosophical necessity. Realism became a means of rationalizing the unquestioning acceptance of **traditional values** which appealed to “common sense.”

Transcendentalism (1820 – 1860):

“The movement was rather conservative in its metaphysics and epistemology, but it was decidedly liberal in its morals and politics. It was fairly inchoate movement – literary, religious, political, and philosophical – distinguishable more perhaps by what it opposed than by what it supported.” (Kurtz, *American Thought Before 1900*, pp. 26)

Primary Figures: William Ellery Channing (1780 – 1842), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882), Theodore Parker (1810 – 1860), Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862), Amos Bronson Alcott (1799 – 1888), James Freeman Clarke (1810 – 1888), James Marsh (1794 – 1842), Frederick Henry Hedge (1805 – 1890), Margret Fuller (1810 – 1850), Orestes A. Brownson (1803 – 1876), and many others.

Initially the transcendentalists were **Unitarians**, who liberal in sentiment, transformed **Calvinistic** pessimism to optimism; God was loving and just, not arbitrary or vindictive; man was not necessarily sinful but capable of moral virtue and goodness. The Unitarians also reacted against the mechanistic universe and rational religion of the deists. **Nature** manifested divine purpose, and man might know and appreciate its full beauty. But man must transcend ordinary understanding or experience, and his soul must have direct contact with divinity; this might be done largely without benefit of clergy. The Unitarians, like the Deists, wished to use reason to interpret the Bible but, unlike the Deists, many accepted revelation.

1. reacting against the limitations of Lockean conception of experience
2. there is a transcendental realm over and beyond the phenomenal appearances, and ultimate reality which only reason and intuition could penetrate
3. criticized the dependence of knowledge based on empirical and scientific facts – such evidence was only probable, and ended in skepticism
4. poets and seers who proclaimed truth as they saw it and were not interested in rational proofs
5. there are two worlds – (a.) the unreal world of sensations, which are the objects of physical science, and (b.) the unseen world, a religious, moral, and aesthetic universe, which only poetry and philosophy could discover
6. movement stimulated by moral idealism
7. goal is to liberate the individual and to free him from the blind hold of custom and convention

The transcendentalists were humanitarians deeply concerned with moral progress, with political and social justice and equality. Each individual possessed an implicit dignity, which was also a claim to equality, for each person had both the ability and the right to consult his private intuition. They fought against acquiescence to injustice and defended liberalism in social action.