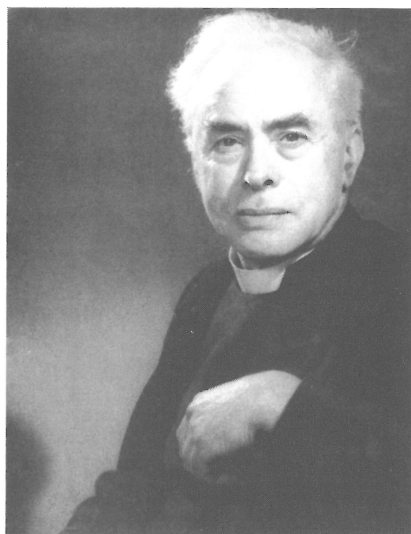


FOUR PHILOSOPHICAL ANGLICANS

Professor Sell explores the lives and ideas of four unjustly neglected Anglican philosophers: W. G. De Burgh (1866–1943); W. R. Matthews (1881–1973); O. C. Quick (1885–1944); H. A. Hodges (1905–1976). This study fills an important gap in the history of twentieth-century philosophical and theological thought. Sell argues that these writers covered a wide range of philosophical topics in an illuminating way, and that a comparison of their respective standpoints and methods is instructive from the point of view of the viability or otherwise of Christian philosophizing. He discusses the challenges these four philosophical Anglicans issued to certain important trends in the philosophy and theology of their day, and argues that some of them are of continuing relevance.



W. G. De Burgh



W. R. Matthews



O. C. Quick



H. A. Hodges

Four Philosophical Anglicans

W. G. De Burgh, W. R. Matthews,
O. C. Quick, H. A. Hodges

ALAN P. F. SELL

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W.G. DeBurgh, W.R. Matthews, O.C. Quick, H.A. Hodges
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To Andrew and Jean MacRae

*Faithful friends, and companions in
theological education*

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Preface

I will sometimes go on both sides of the Hedge, though by so doing I be scratcht.

Richard Baxter, *A Third Defence of the Cause of Peace*, 1681, II, 85.

Baxter's experience, gleaned during a period of doctrinal strife, may be shared by those who take the risk of working in the borderland between philosophy and theology. Happily, the excitement of conversing with past and present thinkers across the frontiers with a view to formulating one's position on significant matters more than compensates for the perils faced. Not a little of my work has been undertaken with a view to introducing into the ongoing conversation philosophers and theologians who have become largely forgotten. They constituted the intellectual hinterland against the background of which better known authors presented their wares. If we look behind the 'big names' we shall not only understand their intellectual context better, but we shall find writers who, although they may never be named on lists of 'set texts', nevertheless had things of importance to say. The four Anglicans treated here are writers of this kind.

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Permission to reproduce the image of O. C. Quick has kindly been granted by the Senior Common Room, Christ Church, Oxford, and I am grateful to Judith Curthoys, College Archivist, for her assistance in this matter. Efforts to trace those who own the copyright of the images of W. G. de Burgh (from *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXIX, 1943), W. R. Matthews (from *Memories and Meanings*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1969) and H. A. Hodges (from *God Beyond Knowledge*, Macmillan, 1979) have proved unsuccessful. However, James Rivington of the British Academy, Loreen Brown of Hodder, and Ruth Tellis of Palgrave Macmillan, have no objection to the use of the images reproduced from their publications.

Thanks are also due to Sarah Lloyd of Ashgate Publishing who, once again, has allowed me to enter her list; to Barbara Pretty for her expert attention to the publishing process; and to all involved in the production of this handsome volume.

It goes without saying that this book would not have appeared without the encouragement and support of Karen, my wife; but it must be said.

I dedicate this work with affection and esteem to our friends of many years, Andrew and Jean MacRae, who first introduced us to the delights of the beautiful Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, in which Acadia Divinity College is set, and who have been companions on the way ever since.

Alan P. F. Sell
Milton Keynes, UK

List of Abbreviations

DNCBP: W. J. Mander and Alan P. F. Sell, eds, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century British Philosophy*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002.

DTCBP: Stuart Bown, ed., *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century British Philosophy*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005.

ODNB: *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In this book the careers of four philosophical Anglicans are sketched, and their writings are discussed. W. G. de Burgh (1866–1943) was the first Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading; W. R. Matthews (1881–1973) was Dean and Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at King’s College, London, before becoming Dean first of Exeter Cathedral and then of St. Paul’s; O. C. Quick (1885–1944) held various ecclesiastical appointments before becoming Professor of Theology at Durham University, and then Regius Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford; and in 1934 H. A. Hodges (1905–1976) succeeded his older colleague, de Burgh, as the second Professor of Philosophy at Reading. Of all of them it may be said that their primary academic interest was philosophical, though in the case of Quick and Hodges in particular it must be noted that their theological acumen was considerable. The same may be said of de Burgh, though in his case he tried hard, without always succeeding, to remember that he was a philosopher, not a theologian or an apologist, and he did not publish specifically theological works. Taking all of their publications together we find contributions to philosophy, theology, doctrine, psychology, apologetics and spirituality. Reference will be made to all of these.

Pride of place, however, will be given to philosophy, for the reason why these four philosophical Anglicans are of particular interest (and other Anglicans and non-Anglicans¹ might have been chosen) is that they illustrate some of the ways in which committed Christians charted their intellectual course during a period of philosophical upheaval.² The idealistic metaphysics in which they had been reared was under strong, if not always justified, attack. Science was held in high esteem by many, and scientific method, its abstractive nature notwithstanding, was deemed by some to be the sole method of arriving at truth. Barthian theology seemed to many to entail a retreat from reason into a circle of revelation, and logical positivists were branding religious, no less than aesthetic and moral, discourse nonsense. Through all of this de Burgh, Matthews, Quick and Hodges managed to keep their heads and maintain their faith. Our purpose here is to see how they went about doing this. This enquiry into their procedures and findings is by no means an antiquarian or a nostalgic exercise. It is offered in the expectation that

¹ Robert Franks the Congregationalist comes immediately to mind. See Alan P. F. Sell, *Hinterland Theology. A Stimulus to Theological Construction*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008, ch. 10 and *passim*.

² For an account of this see Alan P. F. Sell, *The Philosophy of Religion 1875-1980*, London: Croom Helm, 1988, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996.

since philosophical ideas cannot be constricted by time or space (which means that heresies as well as truths are long lived) we may find encouragement, rebuke, and certainly stimulus, in the contributions and methods of our intellectual forebears.

Chapter 2

William George de Burgh (1866–1943): Reason, Morality and Religion

[T]hose who are enlightened by religious vision possess an almost uncanny power of handling their own difficulties and those of others with efficiency, and of discerning, in the most unpromising quarters, the signs of God's indwelling Spirit and of a desire for him akin to their own.¹

W. G. de Burgh could have been speaking of himself. Tall, slim, bespectacled, and of aristocratic features, he had an aloof air but, as we shall see, his students loved him, notwithstanding the dim view he took of some of their attainments and interests. Beneath all was a religiously-grounded optimism which looked for the best in others, and could write off no one. His friend, A. E. Taylor, supplies many of the basic family details:

William George de Burgh, born at New Wandsworth on 24 October 1866, was the son of William de Burgh, a barrister holding a post at the War Office, and of his wife, Hannah Jane Monck Mason, a great-granddaughter of Samuel Whitbread,² and granddaughter of the Lady Grey (great-grandmother to Viscount Grey of Fallogen) who was well known in the Evangelical movement of her day.³ Of his paternal uncles, one, Maurice de Burgh, was Archdeacon of Ness, another, Hubert, became a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. Dean de Burgh, his paternal grandfather, was the builder of the church at Sandymount, Dublin. He was thus of mixed Norman-Irish and Northumberland strain, an 'aristocrat' in the proper sense of a much abused word ... his mother (who lost her own father early) was much attached to her uncle, Sir George Grey, Home Secretary, and to her cousins, in particular to Thomas Baring, Lord Northbrook.⁴

¹ W. G. De Burgh, *Towards a Religious Philosophy* (hereinafter TRP), London: Macdonald & Evans, 1937, 50.

² For Samuel Whitbread (1720–96), brewer and landowner, and his son, also Samuel (1764–1815), politician, see ODNB.

³ For Mary, Lady Grey (1770–1858), née Whitbread, half-sister to the politician, enthusiastic distributor of Bibles to seafarers, see ODNB.

⁴ A. E. Taylor, 'William George de Burgh, 1866–1943', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXIX, 1943, 371–2. For de Burgh see also DTCBP; ODNB; and further references below.

With this pedigree it is all the more significant that de Burgh was able ‘to be natural and unconstrained in all company’, and that there was no ‘trace of social superiority or snobbery’ about him.⁵

Encouraged by his mother, daughter of Captain Thomas Monck Mason RN, whom Taylor describes as ‘devout and rather “Puritan”’, de Burgh enjoyed learning much of the Bible by heart – ‘an admirable practice which I could wish to see more common than it appears to-day’ declares Taylor, before drily adding, ‘it is not so easy to see why, in later life, he took the pleasure he is reported to have done in memorizing much of the information provided by Bradshaw’s [railway] *Guide* and Whitaker’s *Almanac*. ... Nor do I know how to explain the keen delight which de Burgh has told me he found in the posting of accounts in neatly written columns with carefully ruled lines in red ink.’⁶

When de Burgh was 12, and still at preparatory school, his father died, leaving his mother in some financial difficulty. This was exacerbated by the fact that in 1880 de Burgh failed to secure a scholarship to Winchester College. Helped by a relative, however, he enrolled as a commoner. During the school holidays he went to stay with his Scots cousins, the Burn Murdochs, in Perthshire. There he immersed himself in music and became an ardent walker: ‘forty miles, including the climbing of a mountain, is said to have been his idea of a good walk’.⁷ He showed no interest in country sports and heartily disliked school games, though he was well versed in cricket and enjoyed watching the game. Among his school friends was the budding philosopher, H. W. B. Joseph, with whom he maintained contact throughout his life.⁸

To his own surprise de Burgh won a classical Postmastership at Merton College, Oxford, and was placed in the second class in Honour Moderations in 1887, and in the first class in *Literae humaniores* in 1889. In addition to Joseph, de Burgh’s Oxford classical-philosophical contemporaries included W. R. Hardie, H. H. Joachim and J. A. Smith.⁹ On leaving Oxford de Burgh was briefly an assistant master at Derby School, from whence he went to Toynbee Hall, London, where he became Censor of Studies at Balliol House, a residence for male city workers who wished to benefit from social and intellectual pursuits. Named after the academic and social reformer, Arnold Toynbee, and opened in 1884, Toynbee Hall was set in the heart of one of London’s poorest areas, noted for its large contingents of

⁵ Ibid., 372.

⁶ Ibid., 372, 373.

⁷ Ibid., 374.

⁸ For Horace William Brindley Joseph (1867–1943) see DTCBP; ODNB. Joseph outlived de Burgh by just three months.

⁹ For William Ross Hardie (1862–1916), Harold Henry Joachim (1868–1938) and John Alexander Smith (1863–1939) see DTCBP; ODNB.

Jewish¹⁰ and Irish¹¹ immigrants. This was by no means the environment in which an aristocrat of the snobbier sort would have chosen to live. In 1895 de Burgh moved into lodgings in Stepney with his friend Patrick Duncan, who rose from being a lecturer at Toynbee Hall to become the first Governor-General of the Union of South Africa.¹² De Burgh became a lecturer in the University Extension system, a venture originated by the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London during the 1870s, the objective of which was to provide lectures on a wide variety of subjects to working-class people in various parts of the country. As an extension lecturer de Burgh ‘became eminently successful, though he always rated his own work in this department as a mere retailing of the second-best at second-hand’.¹³ In 1896 he was appointed Lecturer in Greek and Latin at the University Extension College in Reading. The first University Extension lectures had been given in Reading in 1885, and the College had been opened in 1892.

On 26 January 1897 de Burgh married Edith Mary, daughter of William Francis Grace, Vice-Consul at Mogador. They had two daughters and a son, and their home at Southern Hill was open to staff and students alike. In the same year philosophy was added to de Burgh’s classical brief. In 1902 the institution became a University College, and when, in 1907, its complement of faculties was determined, he became the first Professor of Philosophy and Dean of the Faculty of Letters – positions he held until his retirement in 1934. From time to time he was invited to consider moving elsewhere – to a projected extension college at Worcester, to the Muslim University of Aligarh, to the Principalship of the Training College at Blackheath, London; but de Burgh stuck to his last and was deeply committed to the Reading enterprise. In 1910, on the arrival of P. N. Ure as the first Professor of Classics, de Burgh relinquished that subject.¹⁴ Henceforth he ‘managed Philosophy along with one lecturer’.¹⁵ This was still a formidable task, and it is more than likely that de Burgh’s own teaching experience informed his observation upon that of his friend, George Dawes Hicks, who at University College, London, traversed the entire field of philosophy ‘almost single-handed. ... Hicks, with characteristic courage and energy, grappled boldly with a problem that

¹⁰ Many of whom worked in tailoring, while others became prominent dance band leaders and musicians – Ambrose, Lew Stone, Oscar Rabin, Joe Loss, to name but a few.

¹¹ Many of whom became dockers.

¹² For Duncan (1870–1943) see ODNB.

¹³ A. E. Taylor, ‘William George de Burgh’, 375.

¹⁴ Percy Neville Ure held his Chair from 1910 to 1946. The researches of Ure and his wife, Annie D. Ure, into Greek ceramics were of international significance, and led to the creation of the fourth most important collection in the United Kingdom. It is housed in the Ure Museum, University of Reading, of which Annie Ure was curator until her death in 1976.

¹⁵ J. C. Holt, *The University of Reading: The First Fifty Years*, Reading: University of Reading Press, 1977, 16.

besets the teaching not only of philosophy but of every subject in all our English Universities, save at Oxford and Cambridge'.¹⁶

As if the Chair and the Deanship were not enough, de Burgh was prominent in guiding the institution in its early years. Whereas the large civic universities founded in the Victorian period could not have fulfilled their mission had they not admitted students into halls of residence and welcomed many who continued to live at home, the aim from the outset at Reading was to create an institution centred, after the Oxford pattern, in collegiate life. This proved attractive to a number of distinguished scholars who welcomed the relief from the accumulation of regulations with which they had previously been encumbered, were stimulated by the opportunity to create something new, and found the proximity of Reading to both Oxford and London beneficial to their research work. De Burgh was intimately involved in the leadership of the University College, and played an important part during its passage from its status as a College teaching to the London University external degree syllabi, to that of a degree-granting, chartered, university in 1926: the only new university created in the United Kingdom between the two World Wars.

From the outset the University was well blessed in its leadership. Its first Vice-Chancellor, W. M. Childs, was as skilled in the encouragement of potential benefactors as he was austere towards his colleagues and pessimistic in his annual reports;¹⁷ the first Registrar, the Reverend Francis H. Wright, who had held secretarial posts in the University College since 1887, was an able administrator; de Burgh was the trusted academic, and from 1926 until he retired in 1934 he was the first Deputy Vice-Chancellor. It was said of Childs, Wright and de Burgh that they 'formed a kind of inner cabinet'.¹⁸ Of de Burgh's contribution Childs wrote,

In temperament we were often as far apart as two men whose friendship went back to the careless days of youth could well be. To agree with de Burgh upon a question of policy was serious, for there was apt to follow by contagion a quickening of pace; to disagree was to find out once again that by reason of exuberance, energy of mind, and power of argumentation, he could be, like Dr. Johnson, a 'tremendous companion'. As I call to mind those discussions of long ago, two things stand out, one is his preference for the higher, though not always the more inviting, of two alternatives. The other is his magnanimity under provocation, often surprising in a man whose reactions to words could be vehement. ... Without my colleague's co-operation and advocacy the university

¹⁶ W. G. de Burgh, 'George Dawes Hicks 1862–1941', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXVII, 1941, 411. For Hicks see also DTCBP; ODNB.

¹⁷ For William Macbride Childs (1869–1939) see ODNB. De Burgh contributed 'Dr. W. M. Childs', to *The Portmuthian*, LVI, 2 July 1939, 36–41.

¹⁸ J. C. Holt, *The University of Reading*, 42.

movement at Reading could neither have been undertaken nor successfully pursued.¹⁹

Like other staff members, de Burgh acquired books for the library, and he was also involved in appointing members of staff, not least Franklin Sibley, who succeeded Childs as Vice-Chancellor on the latter's retirement in 1929. Sibley recalled that having been interviewed for the post, and having dined with Childs and a few others, during which time no reference to the vacancy was permitted, 'it was not until Saturday morning, when old de Burgh blew in again for a private chat, that the cat came out: and he then begged the question by telling me what I should find and how I should like it etc. etc., giving me some amusing sketches of some of his colleagues'.²⁰

De Burgh, like his successor in the Chair of Philosophy, H. A. Hodges, was a deeply committed Christian,

but they tended to assume that religion was a highly individual matter, to be discussed with, but not imposed on, students. There were others who, whatever their faith, were unlikely to encourage the development of the formal study of Theology. Doris Stenton regarded Theology as an 'easy subject' and fought with vigour and success against the introduction of Biblical Studies into the Faculty of Letters. ... It was simply assumed that the University was a secular, scholarly institution. It has so remained.²¹

Off campus de Burgh did not hide his Christian light under a bushel of academic reserve. He chaired his church's Parish Council, from time to time he gave sermons in local churches, and he served more widely as President of the local branch of the League of Nations.

During World War I de Burgh had time to turn his hand to consistent writing, and he produced his most widely-read work, *The Legacy of the Ancient World*. It was published in 1923, revised in 1947, and reissued in 1953 and 1955. 'I hope all my Honours men will read it,' said John Burnet, Professor of Greek at St. Andrews

¹⁹ Quoted by A. E. Taylor, 'William George de Burgh', 380–81.

²⁰ J. C. Holt, quoting a letter of Sibley to A. E. Morgan of 19 May 1929 (URC, box 256), *ibid.*, 41 n. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82. Doris Stenton was a Lecturer in History and the wife of Frank Stenton, the medieval historian, who was a Research Fellow in the University College from 1908 to 1912, and then held the Chair of History until his appointment as Vice-Chancellor in succession to Sibley in 1946. For Doris (1894–1971) and Frank (1880–1967) Stenton see ODNB. Doris was Frank's student. She graduated in 1916 and married him in 1919. Among other honours she was FBA; but she clearly manifested either that dismissive attitude towards Theology by which some of the brightest advertise themselves as having an intellectual blind spot, or that illiberal attitude which is never more incongruous than when it is displayed by scholars of the *liberal arts*, or both.

University, to A. E. Taylor, ‘it is exactly the book I have wanted to see written for many years.’²² Taylor’s verdict on the book was that ‘I can conceive no better prophylactic against the current clamour of raucous voices – some of them, *pro pudor*, those of University Professors – shouting for the destruction of “medieval rubbish” than a serious study of *The Legacy of the Ancient World*’.²³ De Burgh also found time to contribute papers to the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *The Hibbert Journal*, whose reviews editor was his friend George Dawes Hicks, *Philosophy*, *Theology*, and the *Proceedings of the British Academy*. A number of these received a new lease of life in the books he published following his retirement: *Towards a Religious Philosophy* (1937); *From Morality to Religion* (1938 – his Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews; *Knowledge of the Individual* (1939) – his Riddell Memorial Lectures before the University of Durham; and, posthumously, *The Life of Reason* (1949). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1938.

To his published works I shall turn shortly. But what of de Burgh the teacher? As to his method we have his own testimony:

[I]n the case of philosophy, as in that of Art or Religion, it is futile to seek for a definition at the outset; ... Better far to point to an actual philosopher engaged in philosophic thinking, ... A still more helpful answer is to direct [a student] to the classical masterpieces of metaphysics, bidding him catch fragments of the speculative technique of great thinkers by laying his own mind alongside of theirs and entering, as best he can, into the method of their reasoning. If the student, as well he may, rebels against this relegation to the study of back numbers, there is nothing to hinder him from doing the like with the works of contemporary philosophers.²⁴

Student responses to de Burgh’s teaching are plentiful and illuminating. Of de Burgh one wrote that

he admired us for our zest in living, our vitality, but he censured us for our ignorance, our disinclination to think and our lack of reverence for the things that are great and the things that are eternal. But he did not stop at generalizations – he cared for us as individuals too. A student was not something to which he taught philosophy. ... His interest made one want to do well. ... In a sense he was always preaching but it was so spontaneous and inevitable that one never felt it intrusive. Who but Billy would have produced the remark: ‘Humanism – to love a man just because he is a man – is one thing, but to love him because he

²² A. E. Taylor, ‘William George de Burgh’, 382.

²³ *Ibid.*, 384. For a less generous review, which does not do justice to de Burgh’s intention or achievement, see A. W. Gomme, *The Classical Review*, XXXVIII, November–December 1924, 177–8.

²⁴ W. G. de Burgh, *The Life of Reason* (hereinafter LR), London: Macdonald & Evans, 1949, 82.

is part of the mystical body of Christ incorporate – why, that’s quite a different kettle of fish.’

The same writer continues,

We most of us heard him on Logic and few of us evaded his famous ‘Republic’ lectures. ... He lectured to us in his own room in the University. We sat about his fire and he sat in the biggest armchair with his scrappy old notes in one hand and his spectacles in the other. He thundered his stuff out at us and drove it in by repetition. ... When he digressed he was never dull. ... I can remember his eloquence on the possibility of developing an art of smell, or a projected life of Satan, best of all perhaps on ‘Washing’. He treated the subject historically, geographically and personally – how staying in Paris he was obliged to wash himself *en arrondissements*. Lectures were a serious matter. He reproved you if you came without a gown. If you omitted to come at all ... he was apt to notice. ‘Will you tell Miss Wratishlaw that this is the way to Death, Destruction and Damnation?’²⁵

Another student writes, ‘It is difficult for me ... to express with any degree of adequacy what I owe to Professor de Burgh’;²⁶ yet another: ‘To present the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a man and a brother – and a rather jolly one at that – was, I felt, an achievement worthy of emulation. ... This illustrates another of Professor de Burgh’s merits. Not only must philosophy be taken seriously, it must be taken gladly. The way to understanding is through liking ...’²⁷

In one of his last addresses to the residents of Wessex Hall de Burgh said,

I suppose that you want me to talk about ancient history, but the fact is that I am tired of ancient history. What I care about is the future. A university could manage quite well without students, but since they insist on coming they should take some responsibility for the university, which *qua* university is interested in nothing but their intelligence. A place with hot and cold water laid on does not exist to train character. If you want to be in a place that will give you that run away to sea or go on the stage. Things that may matter infinitely to you as an individual, like games, religion or friends, don’t matter at all to the university. The university is dependent on its members and the present lot of students are a very poor lot by what they might be. ... Beware of false prophets. No one reads the Old Testament nowadays, but if any one of you did, you would know that the

²⁵ Extracts from the Diary of Vera Willis, 1931–34, quoted by J. C. Holt, *The University of Reading*, 86, 92.

²⁶ Miss Berthen, quoted by A. E. Taylor, ‘William George de Burgh’, 382.

²⁷ A. C. Mason, quoted *ibid*.

mark of a false prophet was that he said nice things to the folk who entertained him. God bless you, my dears!²⁸

Somewhat more formally, in his last address as Dean to the students of the Faculty of Letters he exhorted them thus:

You have come to a university to have the opportunity of contact, not merely with direct living, but also with what is absolute and enduring in art, literature and the other things that have value. And you have the opportunity of avoiding the mistake of separating off the values and standards as something abstract and remote from the direct experience which you all want to enjoy.²⁹

With the advent of World War II and the dispersal of numerous academics to other duties, de Burgh began teaching at New College, Oxford. During the summer of 1942, however, he suffered a slight stroke whilst rambling alone on the Dorset downs. He recovered sufficiently to resume his teaching at Oxford, but he soon became weaker and was advised to take a complete rest. This he did, and then returned to New College in January 1943. But on 27th of that month he died at Toller Pocorum, Dorset, where he was buried three days later. 'His name,' wrote P. N. Ure, 'ranks among the highest in the history of the great educational movement of the last half century.'³⁰

I

A. E. Taylor wrote somewhat less than the truth when he declared that 'de Burgh was always, in later life, an eminently *well-read* philosopher',³¹ for the qualification 'in later life' is redundant. Attentive readers of de Burgh's works from his earliest book onwards cannot be unaware of the fact that they are in the presence of one who is widely read and who, for the most part, wears his learning lightly. I say 'for the most part', for he does not hesitate to throw in untranslated phrases in Latin, French, and occasionally Greek and German; he has a habit of introducing esoteric learning by optimistically writing, 'As everybody knows ...'; and he will quote lines of poetry without patronizing (or assisting) his readers by divulging the names of their authors. But for the most part his writing is pellucid and free of philosophical jargon.

²⁸ J. C. Holt, *The University of Reading*, 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87. Remarks which, presumably, would be incomprehensible to those present-day vice chancellors whose primary objective is that their universities be 'business-facing'.

³⁰ P. N. Ure, 'Professor W. G. de Burgh. An Appreciation', *The Times*, 1 September 1943, 7.

³¹ A. E. Taylor, 'William George de Burgh', 373.

Precisely because of his breadth of learning it will make for clarity if I approach de Burgh's major themes by introducing first his broad judgements concerning major philosophers and philosophical traditions, as well as his attitudes towards the intellectual trends of his own time.

In his first book, *The Legacy of the Ancient World*, de Burgh ranges widely. He traverses early Eastern civilizations – the Egyptian, Babylonian and Persian among them. In particular the book provides ample evidence of de Burgh's grasp of the heritage of Greece and Rome, and this is the aspect of the work on which I shall focus, since to a considerable degree de Burgh's thought was formed by this classical inheritance. Even more significant was the influence upon him of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. However, de Burgh made a not altogether successful attempt to keep this at bay in his philosophical writings for he wished to present himself not as a theologian, still less as an apologist for Christianity, but as a philosopher who was alive to the fact that both the Greek love of rational argument and the Hebrew grasp of moral values and spiritual insights had permeated the bulk of subsequent Western philosophy. Indeed, '[T]he development of the religion of Israel, in the hands of the prophets, into a spiritual monotheism was as original and distinctive a creation of the Hebrew religious genius as the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were of the intellectual genius of Greece.'³² But if belief in one God and his moral government of the world was the strength of Hebrew religion, 'Its besetting weakness was the ineradicable presupposition that the divine purpose was concentrated on a single people ... [T]he Hebrew people failed to realize effectively the larger hope of the prophets.'³³ While the Hebrews had a keen sense of God's dealings with them in history and, at their best, gave due place to conscience, the intellectual, universalizing, impulse came from Christianity, itself driven by the missionary imperative and influenced by Greek thought.

By contrast with Hebrew thought, the Greek ambition, epitomized by Plato and Aristotle, was the quest of knowledge and the disinterested pursuit of truth. Behind them lay the contributions of the sixth-century BC philosophers of Miletus, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, who sought by observation and experiment 'to understand the world as a world of rational law, with system and unity of structure'.³⁴ They went in quest of a primary, permanent, changeless, substance – water, vapour or fire, for example – from which, in accordance with necessary law, were derived the phenomena of sense experience. At the beginning of the fifth century Heraclitus of Ephesus conceived of nature as being in a state of constant flux, such that the world as perceived by sense is ever coming, or ceasing, to be. Meanwhile Pythagoras had developed pure geometry, and had applied mathematics in the direction of showing the independent reality of the physical universe – an idea pursued by Plato in the *Timaeus*. Parmenides and the Eleatics contended that if the real were one and corporeal then the many and motion

³² W. G. de Burgh, *The Legacy of the Ancient World* (Hereinafter LAW), 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 88, 89. 'Most of the prophets' would have been more accurate.

³⁴ LAW, 121.

were illusory. In response to this Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Leucippis of Miletus, founder of the Atomic school, agreed that reality was corporeal, but that it was also many; while Socrates and Plato concluded that the real was one, but that it was a spiritual, not a corporeal, unity. In opposition to the inherited religious traditions, and notwithstanding the resultant ridicule to which they were subjected in Old Attic comedy, the philosophers held to a 'conception of intellectual contemplation (*theoria*) as the highest human activity, akin to the divine', that, 'realized first by the Pythagoreans and developed by Plato and Aristotle, carries us into the very heart of the Hellenic genius'.³⁵

From about 450 BC onwards, 'For the first time in history the clear light of reason was directed upon the problem of human conduct.'³⁶ De Burgh likens the resulting intellectual ferment to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, stimulated as it was by its central figure, Voltaire. That Enlightenment prepared the ground for Kant; the Greek 'Enlightenment' prepared the way for Plato. It came to be believed that virtue did not depend upon talents, gifts or fortune, but upon acquired theory. Concurrently, the development of rhetoric drew attention to the importance of words as symbols of thoughts; hence to the analyses of such concepts as 'nature' and 'convention' undertaken by the Sophists. The Sophists followed no one party line. Hippias grounded moral duty in eternal, divine, natural law; Thrasymachus taught that might is right; Protagoras, that in the absence of unchanging natural moral principles the conventions of the *polis* should be honoured by the citizen. On which de Burgh comments,

The tone of these discussions affords a striking parallel to those of the later eighteenth-century enlightenment, embodied in the writings of Rousseau, Tom Paine, and William Godwin; in the preamble to the American Declaration of Independence, and in the manifestoes of the French Revolution; as also to those invoked in our own day by the advocates of the claims of the superman and of the super-state against the restrictions of conventional moral valuations.³⁷

If their criticisms of received religious beliefs rendered the Sophists liable to the charge of scepticism, their redirection of thought towards rationality proved to be a boon of lasting importance.

Of Socrates' faith in reason there could be no doubt. To him 'the discipline of philosophy was at the same time the fulfilment of a religious vocation'.³⁸ His motivating idea was, in his own words, that 'An unexamined life is not worth living'.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., 131.

³⁶ Ibid., 160.

³⁷ Ibid., 163. In a note de Burgh cites Euripides's Heracles in *The Mad Heracles* as a superman figure, while he finds the super-state in the Melian dialogue in Thucydides, V. 84 ff.

³⁸ Ibid., 167.

³⁹ Ibid., quoting *Apol.* 38.

His conclusion went against the grain of received popular and educated opinion. Whereas Homer, like the Hebrews, had taught that the soul was the life-principle that left the body at death and then dwelt in the under-world in a state of ghostly unconsciousness; and the Orphic and Pythagorean thinkers had maintained that the soul was divine and immortal, and that it escaped from the prison of the body at death; Socrates ‘identified the soul with our conscious personality, the self possessed of the capacity for rational activity, both speculative and practical, which, if duly tended, found expression both in scientific knowledge and in moral character. This was a wholly new and revolutionary doctrine’,⁴⁰ and it aroused the hostility of many.

Socrates’ younger contemporary, Plato, was concerned both to know the truth and to reform the conditions of life. ‘Both problems,’ says de Burgh, ‘the speculative and the practical, found for Plato their common solution in philosophy, in a knowledge that should reveal the inner truth of the world as ideal goodness, and form the goal of individual and social action. What is this knowledge? And how can man attain to it? These are the cardinal questions of Plato’s philosophy.’⁴¹ In his *Theaetetus* he set his face against the sensation-based relativism flowing down from Protagoras, according to which every passing appearance was true to percipients in the instant of their perceiving it, and developed his doctrine of the two worlds of sensation and of thought. He argued that sense data could be known ‘only by the aid of general concepts, apprehended not by the senses but by thought’.⁴² In the intelligible world ‘there existed in unchanging being, as substantial realities, the Forms or Ideas, the perfect archetypes, “shared in” or “imitated by” their manifold and changing copies in the world of sense. These Forms alone were the proper objects of knowledge.’⁴³ The supreme Form was the Form of the Good. From the *Phaedo* we learn that Plato was led to this position by his study of mathematical, moral and aesthetic judgements.

De Burgh is anxious to guard against the misunderstanding of Plato. First, the Forms are not thought-abstractions, but substances existing in an objective spiritual world independently of the thinker. Secondly, ‘The Form of the Good is not identified by Plato with God. God is ... a living and active soul, the self-moving source of the motion of the heavens and ... the creator of the sensible universe, after the pattern of the Forms and in accordance with mathematical law.’⁴⁴ The identification of God with the Form of the Good, de Burgh reminds us, and the equation of the Forms with God’s eternal thoughts, was the work of Neoplatonists and medieval thinkers. Thirdly, Plato does not maintain that the sense-world has no truth, but only that ‘its partial truth is visible only to the mind that grasps its

⁴⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁴¹ Ibid., 172.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 174.

dependence on the Forms [which] are the true objects of scientific study'.⁴⁵ On the more practical side, Plato believes that human souls are made for cooperation, and in *The Republic* he places government in the hands of the philosopher-kings and 'preaches professorial socialism'.⁴⁶

My principal concern in this section is not fully to expound, still less to challenge, de Burgh's exposition of the philosophers to whom he was indebted, but to indicate his responses to them. He was no mere clone of any of his philosophical predecessors. On the contrary, one of the most interesting features of his writings is his determination to think things through for himself and, as he exhorted his students, to lay his mind alongside that of other philosophers. This done, it becomes clear that in many cases his points of departure from, are as significant as his indebtedness to, those who went before. Thus, while deeply appreciative of Plato's philosophical single-mindedness and his elevation of knowledge and morality, de Burgh could not agree with those who suggested that Plato's philosophy,

because of its other-worldliness and uncompromising idealism [was] more akin to the spirit of Christianity than to that of Greece, which looked to this life and its opportunities for the satisfaction of man's intellectual and moral aspirations. There is truth in this assertion, though the differences are more vital than the likeness. Plato's doctrine of the soul's salvation through laborious intellectual discipline, and of the spiritual direction of society by a scientific aristocracy, carry us a long way from the ideal of a spiritual kingdom to be entered, not by the wise and prudent, but in the spirit of a little child.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, 'Whenever the spirit of man turns from the world of sense and change towards that which is eternal, unchanging, and one, whether it be in intellectual or religious contemplation, it has claimed kinship with the spirit of Plato.'⁴⁸

To de Burgh, Aristotle was the first Platonist, and he regretted that Aristotle's way of pointing out his divergences from Plato had led some latter-day scholars to press the distinction too far. In two sentences he skilfully sums up the principal differences between the thought of Aristotle and Plato:

Like Plato, [Aristotle] held the contemplative life to be the highest; like Plato, he held that to be most real which is most knowable, and sought reality in the eternal truths which are objects, not of sense, but of thought. But these eternal forms were not in his view denizens of a world remote from that of actual experience; they were the governing principles of the world in which he lived.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 207.

In other words, for Aristotle the forms do not exist in a super-sensible world; if they did, they could not participate in our world or assist our knowledge of it. Concrete individuals, not universals, have substantial being. Four kinds of causes contribute to the changes that individual substances undergo: the matter, for example, a block of marble – de Burgh illustrates by reference to an artist; the motion that initiates the change: the mind, hand, and tool of the sculptor; the resulting form; and the end sought: the completed statue. In this we have an example of the teleological thrust which runs through all of Aristotle's thought. Though intensely concerned with causation and change, Aristotle does not posit an infinite regress of causes. Rather, God, pure form, is, as Plato held, the eternal unmoved first mover. This God, however, is not the creator, for that would threaten his impassibility; nor is there providence, for God is utterly apart from nature; he is 'pure self-conscious intelligence' and is both the object and subject of his perfect thought.

A further difference from Plato lies in the fact that

Whereas Plato had insisted uncompromisingly that knowledge of absolute good was essential to true virtue and felicity, and that the goal of man's nature was realized only in a life of devotion to philosophy, Aristotle turns from the search for the Absolute to that for the specific form of human goodness, an end attainable by the good citizen of the Hellenic *Polis* within the compass of his earthly life. ... [Unlike Plato], Aristotle ... distinguishes sharply between knowing and doing, and between theoretical and practical science. He approached the problems of morals in an empirical and inductive spirit.⁵⁰

In morals, Aristotle elevates the practical wisdom of the statesman above the theoretic wisdom of the philosopher, and in this connection the Stoics, Neoplatonists and Epicureans were indebted to him. As for Christian thought at large: 'If Christian speculation on man's ultimate felicity followed naturally in the track of Plato's other-worldliness, it drew freely on Aristotle's ethical teaching in the application of that ideal to man's life on earth.'⁵¹ In de Burgh's estimation Aristotle's great contribution was twofold: he analysed the logic of science and showed how the several sciences were parts of a single whole. Wagging a cautionary finger, he adds:

The formalism and artificiality of the pseudo-Aristotelian logic of the later schoolmen provoked a natural reaction among the great pioneers of science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which still cumbers the minds of many who are ignorant of the history of thought.⁵² In fact, Aristotle ... would have recognized in Galileo and in Descartes the true fulfilment of his own principles

⁵⁰ Ibid., 212, 213.

⁵¹ Ibid., 214.

⁵² De Burgh was no less concerned to set those straight who misconstrued Plato. See, for example, his review of C. E. M. Joad, *Return to Philosophy, being a Defence of Reason*,

of scientific method. Every fresh epoch in the progress of speculative science has been inaugurated by a reform in logic.⁵³

To illustrate the fact that Aristotle's influence was not entirely positive de Burgh cites his distinction between the upper heavens and the sublunary world which 'lay like a burden on astronomers and physicists till the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'.⁵⁴

But Plato and Aristotle were not alone in influencing subsequent thought. De Burgh cites the importance of the Stoic emphasis upon the human will, and on the assertion of both human freedom and divine providence. Philosophers as different as Descartes, Butler and Kant, he says, were attracted by Stoicism's 'moral elevation and uncompromising idealism'.⁵⁵ Indeed, Kant's dictum, 'Nothing is good without qualification but the good will', 'would have been recognized by the Stoic as his own'.⁵⁶ Nor did it escape de Burgh's notice that the apostle Paul's home town of Tarsus was a centre of Stoicism, that Paul used Stoic language when speaking of a heavenly citizenship, and that in his apology at Athens Paul quoted the words 'for we also are his offspring' (Acts 17: 28) from Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus. The Epicureans, though of less intellectual interest, served their troubled times by removing the fears of post-mortem existence which had been engendered by traditional religion, and by encouraging a life of simplicity and mutual affection.⁵⁷

In de Burgh's view the speculative system of Plotinus represents 'the supreme effort of the Hellenic genius to realize philosophy as religion'.⁵⁸ He judges that whereas the Greek intellectual inheritance was absorbed by the Christian Platonists of Alexandria as they developed their theology, Christianity made no similar contribution to Greek philosophy: 'To minds [like that of the emperor Marcus Aurelius] trained in the atmosphere of the schools, its historic revelation and its democratic message of salvation were alike contemptible.'⁵⁹ There were themes common to Stoic and Christian ethics, such as

the recognition of the unconditional command of duty, and of the intrinsic worth of virtue, austerity of moral discipline and the ideal of a spiritual commonwealth embracing all mankind. But the differences were more radical than the resemblances. For the Stoic, human nature was all-sufficient for salvation. His

an Affirmation of Values, and a Plea for Philosophy, London: Faber & Faber, 1935, in *The Hibbert Journal*, XXXIII no. 3, April, 1935, 477.

⁵³ LAW, 215–16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 216 n. 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ De Burgh refers to the praise of Epicurus in the opening lines of Books 3, 5 and 6 of the poem, *de rerum natura*, by the Roman noble, Lucretius.

⁵⁸ LAW, 338.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 342.

faith was only for the wise and strong, who could attain by effort of their own wills the mastery of their souls. It offered a gospel, not of confident hope, but of resignation and detachment. ... Its strength lay in its realization of the meaning of suffering; its weakness in its ignorance of the meaning of love.⁶⁰

Hence the rise in the third century of Neoplatonism: ‘The supersensible world, where Plato of old had sought and found true being, was conceived in more concrete form as the dwelling-place of a God who stood in intimate relationship to the souls of men. Herein lies the intrinsic interest, the distinctive appeal of Neo-Platonism.’⁶¹ De Burgh argues that although Plotinus’ philosophy seems to take Plato’s distinction of the sensible and spiritual worlds as its point of departure, in fact his objective is to overcome the dualism by contending that ‘The spiritual alone has true being; the sensible is no alien reality, but an image begotten by the spiritual in its likeness, in accordance with universal law.’⁶² Plotinus posits a single scale of being ascending from indeterminate, non-existent matter to the One, the Good; though, as de Burgh elsewhere points out, ‘The neo-Platonists ... were careful to guard against predicating “good” univocally of the One and of existing things, and even hesitated to speak of the One as “the source” of values.’⁶³

In Neoplatonic doctrine, creation, ‘as the act of spirit or soul, is not in time, though the timeless causality is mirrored in the sensible world under the form of a temporal history’.⁶⁴ The end for the immaterial human soul is to live ‘without loss of identity, but free from the trammels of the body, in the supersensible world’.⁶⁵ That world comprises a triad of graded hypostases: the world soul, the divine mind of spirit, and the One, the Father, the Good. De Burgh importantly adds that Plotinus is not a pantheist, for to him the One ‘transcends being and all that is’.⁶⁶ He sums matters up thus:

The three *hypostases* that form the Plotinian trinity illustrate how this great thinker gathered up into an original synthesis the rich deposit of earlier philosophy. In the Soul universal we trace the divine world-soul of the Stoics, in Spirit (*Nous*) the self-thinking God of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, in the One the Platonic Form of the Good. Plotinus came nearer than any of his precursors both to the fusion of religion and metaphysics, and to the reconciliation of the claims

⁶⁰ Ibid., 343.

⁶¹ Ibid., 344–5.

⁶² Ibid., 345.

⁶³ W. G. de Burgh, *From Morality to Religion* (hereinafter FMTR), London: Macdonald & Evans, 1938, 169 n. He cites Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.ii.17; VI.viii.8.

⁶⁴ LAW, 347.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 348.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 350.

of the one and of the many to a place in the system of reality. He was the first to give coherent form to a philosophy of emanation.⁶⁷

Neoplatonism fertilized Christian theology, as witness the writings of Augustine, the Greek theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries, and, later, the pseudo-Dionysius. In contrast with Christianity, however, Neoplatonism, like Stoicism, was a doctrine for an intellectual and moral aristocracy, and at its heart was the idea of the perfectibility of the human soul. This approach calls Spinoza to de Burgh's mind:

There is something in Spinoza of the intellectual aristocrat, looking down from a far height on the vulgar follies of mankind, with pity not unmixed with scorn. This is what parts the spirit of Spinoza from that of Christianity. He was profoundly religious; but his religion was that of the intellect: alike in his life and in his doctrine, he was a saint of rationalism.⁶⁸

By contrast, Christianity brought a gospel of redemption to the sinful soul by the grace of God. Again, whereas Neoplatonists regarded revelation as mythical, symbolic and therefore subordinate, to Christianity revelation was historic. Yet again, to Neoplatonists matter was evil, to Christians evil derived from the abuse by humans of their power of free choice. Finally, while Neoplatonism taught that human beings could 'rise in knowledge and love to his divine original', their God 'could not stoop down to man. The cause abides, in bleak aloofness, unconscious and heedless of what transpires beneath.'⁶⁹ Subscribers to this view could only view with horror the impiety of a doctrine which proclaimed the voluntary humiliation of a God who became incarnate. This doctrine 'marks the point of irreconcilable cleavage between the faith of the gospel and the religion and philosophy of Hellenism'.⁷⁰ As he further explains,

No philosophy can be expected to demonstrate its ultimate grounds; we can claim only that they should be such as can account for facts. But the Christian belief that 'God so loved the world', though far from solving all speculative difficulties, goes a long way further towards an intelligible solution. It enables us to build on the analogy of our own experience of creative love, instead of falling back on a blind impulse of emanation.⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁶⁸ TRP, 60.

⁶⁹ LAW, 354.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, n. 1.

In this affirmation the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is presupposed, and this leads me to note a further distinction between Christianity and Neoplatonism to which de Burgh elsewhere draws our attention:

God's simplicity is not to be understood to be exclusive of diversity, as is the simplicity of the neo-Platonic One. Christianity affirms the distinction of persons as real within the divine unity. Revelation apart, a bare unity that in no way *unifies* seems a metaphysical monstrosity; and unification implies diversity within the unifying principle. The doctrine of God's simplicity does not preclude a real distinction of characters in His nature.⁷²

I may indicate the way in which de Burgh thought that Neoplatonism influenced Christian thinkers by reference to some of his remarks upon Augustine. He reminds us that while Plato's Form of Good was distinguished from the artificer-God who was not a form but a soul, the Neoplatonists identified the Good with 'the primal source of being and value. The way was thus prepared for Augustine's further identification of the Neo-Platonic One with the God of Christian theism.'⁷³ Again, Augustine identified the One with the God of love who 'goes forth from himself creatively, not obeying a necessary law of his being, but in an eternal act of self-diffusion, imparting to the world of his creation its measure alike of being and good'.⁷⁴ So far, so good; but in other respects de Burgh was not so inclined to think well of Augustine's teaching. For example, he presents Pelagius as voicing popular but belated Stoicism in his view that human beings may be saved by their own efforts, and declares that Augustine goes too far in rebutting him when he 'develops the doctrines of sin and grace to extremes in which catholic theology has declined to follow him'.⁷⁵ In particular, while concurring in the doctrine of prevenient grace, the Church 'refused assent to [Augustine's] abrogation of human freedom, and to the terrible doctrine that, out of a race doomed to eternal damnation, a few brands have been snatched from the burning by a *fiat* of the divine will'.⁷⁶

'Medieval philosophy,' de Burgh declares, 'was, in no small measure, an induction from the facts of experience.'⁷⁷ Repudiating the term 'the dark ages', he instances John the Scot, John of Salisbury, Abelard and Aquinas as indicating that both the ninth and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries enjoyed a revival of learning which anticipated the later Renaissance. Indeed, modern scholarship has made it clear that 'far from uncritically accommodating a garbled and jaded

⁷² FMTR, 212 n. He refers here to Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1938, 320.

⁷³ FMTR, 146.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁷⁵ LAW, 378.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 439.

Aristotelianism to the dogmas of the church, mediaeval thinkers essayed a reasoned synthesis of theology and metaphysics, which can claim to stand among the most impressive yet achieved in the history of thought'.⁷⁸ Whereas the Greek thinkers set out from metaphysical assumptions and 'found in philosophy the satisfaction of spiritual desire and the secret of the religious life', medieval thinkers 'started from the presuppositions of theology, and worked their way to metaphysics'.⁷⁹ Conscious of the insecurity of society and of the need for stability, thinkers from Anselm to Aquinas elevated authority as 'the rock on which alone the fabric of truth and justice could be reared',⁸⁰ whilst at the same time maintaining their claim to intellectual independence. Moreover, in de Burgh's view, 'The dominant note of the mediaeval spirit was not reverence for authority, but other-worldliness. ... To its thinkers and men of action the supersensible world possessed a reality denied to the scene of man's temporal pilgrimage.'⁸¹

I shall have occasion to return to Aquinas and other medieval thinkers when I come to the principal themes in de Burgh's philosophical writings, but since my purpose in this section of the chapter is to outline his relationship to major trends in his intellectual inheritance, it will not be out of place to quote his summary judgement upon scholasticism as a whole. The great scholastics, he writes,

set themselves to demarcate ... the respective provinces of faith and reason, qualifying the distinction so far as to leave room (1) for a tract of common ground, and (2) for the rights of reason to essay a progressive clarification – especially in the refutation of objections – to truths of revelation. This demarcation proved in the event to be the first step towards the restriction of reason to scientific inference, and the relegation of faith to non-rational emotion. ... Henceforward science could go freely on its proper task of exploration of the creaturely, untrammelled by theological intrusion; while truths revealed to faith were reserved for the theologian, reason being restricted to the ancillary function of developing inferentially the implications of the faith and of defending them by positive or negative arguments against the sophistical objections of unbelievers.⁸²

De Burgh is convinced that the rival claims of reason and faith can be harmonized only if belief in a religious revelation can be shown to be reasonable. To show that this was indeed the case was the principal objective of de Burgh's philosophical endeavour, as we shall see.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 445.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 445–6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 448.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² LR, 93, 123.

II

Enough has been said to indicate the most formative aspects of de Burgh's intellectual inheritance. Before coming to his major philosophical themes we shall do well to consider his views on the intellectual environment and educational challenges of his day. These are of interest in their own right, and they also reveal the degree to which he had processed what thinkers from Socrates to the medievals had given him. I use the verb 'processed' advisedly, for de Burgh believed that intellectual progress was not made 'by mere accretion of new to old; the process is one of interpretation, in which new and old alike are modified'.⁸³

When seeking to describe de Burgh's approach to life and philosophy the adjective which most quickly comes to mind is 'expansive'. I do not mean by this that he was wantonly hospitable to ideas and attitudes whencesoever they came: this he certainly was not. He was, however, stoutly opposed to what he saw as the damaging narrowness of vision which resulted from some scientific, philosophical and humanistic doctrines. Let us consider each of these in turn.

De Burgh was by no means unimpressed by the advances made through scientific research, experiment and application. 'The practical applications of science', he said, 'to the conditions of human life have, in the last few generations, revolutionised the face of nature and the whole order of social intercourse.'⁸⁴ Nevertheless, in January 1940, as World War II was dangerously escalating, he published the first of a two-part article entitled, 'Sources of present world-trouble.' The subtitle is, 'The abuse of knowledge'; the second part, to which I shall come shortly, is subtitled, 'The idol of humanism.' De Burgh sets out from Plato, who insisted that the state would be ruined unless those charged with ruling it grasped the vision of 'the source of all being and value, the Idea or Form of the Good'.⁸⁵ Endorsing Plato's conviction, de Burgh fears that 'The advance of modern science has outstripped man's competence to make right use of it.'⁸⁶ The development of moral character has not kept pace with the increase in knowledge. The benefits flowing from the Renaissance notwithstanding, de Burgh cautions that

The progress has been within a determinate field of knowledge, that of the sciences of man and nature. It may well be that the thinkers and poets and saints of the Middle Ages – Bernard and Anselm, Dante and Aquinas – possessed a deeper knowledge of God and of the things pertaining to God's service than any save a few of the philosophers and theologians of the last four hundred years.⁸⁷

⁸³ LAW, 505, n. 1.

⁸⁴ W. G. de Burgh, 'Sources of present world-trouble. I. The abuse of knowledge,' *The Hibbert Journal*, XXXVIII no. 2, January 1940, 198.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 197–8.

In other words, there has not been progress on all fronts, and de Burgh is especially concerned about the neglect or banishment of the moral-*cum*-spiritual dimension:

All human knowledge and all human desire take their origin perforce from objects of sense-perception; prolonged effort of thought and will is needed, if man is to rise above what is obviously on a level with his capacities, so as to know and desire the spiritual world which lies beyond.⁸⁸

In this sentence we have a further clue to de Burgh's constructive method. It is not only that he wishes to repudiate the restriction of reason to ratiocination so that important dimensions of experience and life are not omitted; it is also that because of his determination to stick to his philosophical last and refrain from apologetics, and still more from theology, he does not follow through to a detailed discussion of his most cherished convictions, of which he nevertheless leaves us numerous hints. We have already seen, for example, that he found Neoplatonism wanting because it could not accommodate a God who comes humbly to human beings in the person of his incarnate Son. But there is nothing of this gracious resource in the sentence just quoted; it has a 'Pelagian' ring, concerned exclusively as it is with *our* effort of thought and will.

How does de Burgh account for the omission by scientists of what he regards as of paramount importance? We recall his view that Aquinas, for all his insight, nevertheless sowed the seed which others later exploited when he distinguished between natural and revealed knowledge. Some were able to find reasons for dispensing with the latter. But Cartesianism was the proximate cause of the bifurcation:

The extrusion of mind from physical Nature and the adoption, in the interest of physics, of the Cartesian doctrine of two mutually exclusive substances [mind and matter] rendered hopeless any explanation of the Mind-body relations. The opinion of leading scientists wavered, then as now, between the frank avowal of Materialism, consciousness being relegated to the paradoxical status of an epi-phenomenon, incidental to physical process; and Subjective Idealism, a metaphysical doctrine that in effect reduced the physical to terms of mind (ideas). The former alternative drew support from its acceptance of a physiological explanation of sense perception.⁸⁹

In this connection de Burgh testified as follows:

I cannot follow Hume or his modern disciples in the view that our knowledge is founded on isolated sense-data, private to the sentient individual and destitute of intrinsic causal connexion. What is apprehended in perception from the outset

⁸⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁸⁹ LR, 40.