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50. Benito Feijóo,
Causes of Spain’s Backwardness (1745)

The Benedictine monk and professor of theology Benito Jerónimo Feijóo y Montenegro (1676–1764) spent much of his career in conflicts with his colleagues in Spain’s universities. Many of Spain’s university professors continued to favor traditional intellectual methods and outlooks such as scholasticism, and far from promoting the spread of Enlightenment ideas in Spain, the universities often served as focal points of opposition to them. Feijóo published this letter, entitled “On the Causes of the Backwardness from which Spain Suffers in the Natural Sciences,” in his Cartas eruditas y curiosas (1742–1760); this letter, which does not name its recipient, appeared in volume 2 of that work, published in 1745.


My very dear sir,

In response to the expressions you offer in your letter about the limited and slow progress that physics and mathematics are making in our Spain, even after foreigners have presented in so many books the great insights they have acquired in these fields, I have a curious desire to know the cause of our nation’s scholarly backwardness, . . . and I will tell you frankly what I have discovered.

My dear sir, there is not just one cause of the very limited progress of the Spaniards in the fields mentioned, but rather many, and although each one by itself would do little damage, the combination of all of them forms an almost insurmountable obstacle.

The first is the limited reach of some of our professors. There is a certain kind of men who are persistently ignorant, ever determined to know very little for no other reason than that they think there is nothing more to know than the little bit they do know. You must have seen more than four of such men, as I have seen more than thirty, who without having their knowledge adorned with more than the logic and metaphysics that are taught in our schools . . . are so satisfied with their knowledge, as if they possessed all the knowledge of an encyclopedia. It is enough simply to mention the new philosophy to turn their stomachs. They can barely hear the name of [French philosopher René] Descartes without laughing and sneering. And if you ask them what Descartes said, or what new opinions he proposed to the world, they do not know and have no idea what to say, for they do not even have the roughest idea of his maxims. . . . The maxim that no one can be condemned without being heard is very broadly accepted. But the scholastics of whom I speak not only pass sentence without hearing from the defendant, but even without having any sense of the body of evidence. . . .
The second cause is the consternation with which all novelty is viewed in Spain. Many say that in the matter of doctrines, the title “new” is grounds enough to condemn them. . . . New doctrines in sacred fields of knowledge are suspicious, and all those who have rightly reproached doctrinal novelties have spoken of this. But to extend this disdain to anything that seems new . . . is to indulge in a stubborn ignorance. . . .

No one should be condemned on mere suspicion. So these scholastics cannot help but be unjust. Suspicion calls for examination, not decision; this is true in all fields, with the sole exception of faith, in which the object of suspicion is hateful, and as such, worthy of damnation.

And so be it; if we are to believe these Aristarchs, we can neither accept Galileo’s four moons of Jupiter, nor Huygens’s and Cassini’s five moons of Saturn, nor Viète’s algebra, nor Napier’s logarithms, nor Harvey’s circulation of the blood; for all these are novelties in astronomy, arithmetic, and physics, of which antiquity was unaware, and are no older than the new philosophy. For the same reason one would have to condemn the immense number of machines and instruments useful to the perfection of the arts that have been invented in the past century. If only these men could see the excesses to which their unlimited aversion to novelties leads them.

They do not even admit that an absurdity follows from this aversion when it falls on their heads like lead. In the arts and sciences there is no discovery or invention that was not once new. Let us apply this point to Aristotle. He invented that system of physics (if it can still be called physics) that these enemies of novelties now follow. Was this system not new at the time of its invention? . . .

The third cause is the mistaken concept that what the new philosophers present us can be reduced to a few useless curiosities. . . . There is no kind of truth whose perception is not useful to the understanding, because all help satisfy one’s natural appetite for knowledge. This appetite came to the understanding from the Author of nature. Is it not a grave insult to the Deity to think that He has placed in the soul an appetite for something useless?

But is it not odd that the philosophers in our lecture halls disdain the investigations of the moderns as useless? Which is more useful: to explore the works of the Author of nature through the examination of the physical world, or to investigate the fictions of human understanding through long reasoned treatises containing logical and metaphysical abstractions? The former naturally elevates the mind to contemplate with admiration the greatness and wisdom of the Creator; the latter keeps the mind locked in labyrinths that that same mind creates. . . .

Lord Jean d’Elgar, an excellent French anatomist who now lives in this city, once brought to my study a sheep’s heart, so that all the professors of
this college could learn of the admirable machine. At inevitable length he set about showing us, part by part, all the visible components that make up the whole, explaining their uses as he went. I can assure you with certainty that it was not just admiration, but even astonishment, that the knowledge we achieved from that prodigious demonstration produced in us. What a variety of instruments! How delicate some of them were, and yet how strong they were together! What a variety of departments, working together toward the same end! What harmony! What a clever combination among all the parts and the uses of them! . . . In the end, we all agreed that we had never seen or considered anything that gave us such a clear, such a perceptible, such a vivid and effective idea of the power and wisdom of the Supreme Artisan.

These and other similar matters make up the studies of the moderns; while those of us who call ourselves Aristotelians break our heads and engulf the classrooms in cries over "whether an entity is univocal or analogous; whether it transcends differences; if the relationship is distinguished from the foundation," etc.

The fourth cause is the diminished or false notion that many here have of modern philosophy, together with the well-founded or baseless concerns against Descartes. They are almost completely ignorant about what the new philosophy is, and what they do understand under that name they consider a creation of Descartes. Since they have formed a sinister idea about this philosopher, they apply this bad concept to all modern learning.

The excellent critic of Cartesian philosophy, Father Daniel, speaks very well in his fine and insufficiently praised work, *Voyage to the World of Descartes*, that those scholars who curse this philosopher's doctrine without having learned about it sufficiently deserve to be called ridiculous . . .

Descartes was endowed with a sublime mind, prodigiously inventive, of great resolve and extraordinary subtlety. As he was both a soldier and a philosopher, he joined the boldness of the soldier to the speculations of the philosopher. Yet this lively spirit degenerated into rashness in him. He took on projects that were too vast. His investigations into received doctrines did not stop at some of the margins. Hence some of his opinions arose in which he views philosophy as strange and views religion with mistrust. His efforts are of an extremely magnificent quality, but they are not equally solid. . . . His ideas about the essence of matter and space conflict . . . with what faith teaches us about the creation of the world. . . . Finally, he did not manage to reconcile his way of philosophizing with the mystery of transubstantiation.

Nevertheless, although Descartes sometimes argued in error, he taught countless philosophers to argue correctly. He opened a legitimate path for discourse, leaving certain stumbling blocks along that path, it is true, but
stumbling blocks that can be avoided or removed. With less genius than Descartes one makes better philosophers than Descartes; with less genius, yes, but with more circumspection. It is easy to make good use of his enlightenment while avoiding his excessive boldness. . . .

What we call “new philosophy” does not depend in any way on the Cartesian system. It can be said that Cartesianism is new philosophy, but not that new philosophy is Cartesian; just as one rightly says that man is an animal, but not that animals are men. . . .

The fifth cause is a zealousness, pious, it is true, but indiscreet and poorly founded; a vain fear that the new doctrines of philosophy will do some damage to religion. Those who are dominated by this religious fear are afraid that the damage will occur through two ways; either that certain maxims, which either on their own or through their consequences are opposed to what faith teaches, will arrive hidden inside foreign philosophical doctrines; or else, that as Spaniards grow accustomed to the liberty with which foreigners (the French, for example) discuss matters of nature, they will begin relaxing their restraints and reasoning with the same freedom about supernatural matters.

I say that neither of those seems likely to happen. The first will not happen because we have plenty of subjects who are skillful and well educated in dogma, who can distinguish what is opposed to faith from what is not, and who will alert the Holy Tribunal that watches over the purity of doctrine so that it will separate the liquor from the poison and throw the chaff into the fire, leaving the wheat intact. This remedy is always available to reassure us, even with respect to those philosophical opinions that come from countries infected with heresy. Beyond this, it is ignorance to believe that its venom is transmitted to all learning in all kingdoms where error reigns. In England, Newtonian philosophy reigns. Isaac Newton, its founder, was just as heretical as the rest of the inhabitants of that island generally are. And yet in his philosophy there has yet to be found anything that either directly or indirectly conflicts with true faith.

To assuage all reasonable fears on the second point, it is enough to note that theology and philosophy have their limits well marked out, and that no Spaniard is unaware that revealed doctrine has superior rights over human discourse, of which all the natural sciences are lacking. And consequently, one can argue freely in the latter field as in one’s own territory, while one merely bends one’s knee with veneration [in matters of religion]. But let us suppose that some person gets out of control and rashly seeks to tread across the sacred limit that the Church places against the excesses of human understanding. Isn’t the remedy already available? Nowhere should one fear this
problem less than in Spain, because of the vigilance of the Holy Tribunal, which can not only cut away the branches and the trunk, but can even rip out the deepest roots of the error... 

To close the door to all new doctrines... is a remedy that is, above all, unnecessary and very violent. It is to place the soul in a very hard condition of slavery. It is to tie down human reason with a very short chain. It is to place an innocent mind in a very small jail cell, simply to avoid a remote possibility that some will eventually commit some excesses.

The sixth and final cause is the resentment (perhaps we could give it a worse name) that is personal, national, and factional. If you examine some men's hearts... among those who denounce the new philosophy, or generally, to be more precise, all literature that is different from what they studied in the classroom, you will find in them some motives that are different from what they say. Listen to them denounce it either as useless or as dangerous. This is not really what is going on inside them. They do not disdain or hate it: they envy it. It is not the literature that displeases them, but rather the author who shines with it... .

This resentment in a few men is purely nationalistic. Spain has still not recovered in all its parts from its hatred of France. There are still very noticeable remains of this ancient ailment in some men. These men wish that the Pyrenees reached to the heavens and that the seas that wash upon the shores of France were filled with reefs so that no one could go from that nation to our own. This can be accepted among common people, and such attitudes can be tolerated among idiots, but it is insufferable in learned professors, who must be aware of the motives we have in common with other nations, especially with Catholics.

I recall having read in the Causas célebres by Gayot de Pitaval that a Spanish lady killed some parrots of Queen María Luisa de Borbón... out of indignation at hearing them speak French, so those miserable animals paid with their lives for having been taught a few words of French in París. Such anger and simpleness is not surprising in an ignorant woman. But not far from her is that irritating and fastidious disapproval with which some who should know better react to any citation from a French book, pretending to believe, and urging others to believe, that there are nothing but useless things in books written in that language. A few years ago a priest, a fine scholastic who had earned the highest honors of his religion, and a gentleman of this city did this, ... saying that there could not be anything of any importance printed in the French language that was not printed in Latin or Spanish.