

Jacopo Zabarella's Real Influence on Early Modern Science

In 1940, John Herman Randall proposed that the Scientific Revolution resulted from adoption of the investigative method of regressus championed by Jacopo Zabarella at the University of Padua. By now the proposal should have been soundly rejected or firmly established in the canon. Alas, it has been neither. An impediment has been inaccessibility of texts.

For Harvard's I Tatti Renaissance Library, I am producing the first modern Latin collated edition and English translation of Zabarella's main methodological works. This paper will present a glimpse into what I am finding.

Randall believed that a Paduan regressus was a combination of induction and deduction and accordingly the source of early modern inductive methodologies. But Randall was misled by isolated passages. In fact, a regressus is a combination of two syllogistic deductions joined by one intuitive insight. There is little similarity to subsequent inductive and empirical inquiry. In fact, Zabarella's text has a spirit quite opposed to such inquiry.

Other similarities, however, are remarkable. One is to the epistemology of Zabarella's English contemporary, Everard Digby. In his hands the intuitive insight of a regressus became a mystical flight of fancy. Second, Zabarella's language and approach include important anticipations of Descartes' notions of clear and distinct ideas.

My impression now is that Randall was right that Zabarella had an underappreciated influence on early modern natural philosophy, but that Randall had it backwards. Bacon, Harvey, Galileo, Newton, et al., were not adopting Zabarella's thought, but consciously reacting against those who did.