

The Great Art of Ramon Llull

The best-known product of Ramon Llull's ambitious undertaking remains his Great Universal Art of Finding Truth. The Great Art basically formalizes techniques of contemplation and interpretation as a model for discovering how all knowledge and being reveal Divine truth. The fundamental device of its method is not deduction, but comparison. The Great Art is universal and finds truth only insofar as it is capable of exhaustively likening anything known to the only knowledge that Llull deemed worth possessing, namely the Christian revelation. The formal mechanics of Llull's system consists in identifying nine Divine Attributes or Dignities of the Godhead as the fundamental Principles of all being and knowledge. Nine additional Relative Principles explain their diffusion and operation in nine Subjects (levels of creation). Nine Rules guide inquiry regarding the Principles and Subjects. Llull symbolizes the categories in each set with the letters B through K of the alphabet, as follows:

Basic of the Lullian Great Art

PRINCIPLES

B Bonitas [Goodness]

C Magnitudo [Greatness]

D Duratio [Eternity]

E Potestas [Power]

F Sapientia [Wisdom]

G Voluntas [Will/Love]

H Virtus [Virtue]

I Veritas [Truth]

K Gloria [Glory]

RELATIVE PRINCIPLES

Differentia [Difference]

Concordantia [Concord]

Contrarietas [Contrariety]

Principium [Beginning]

Medium [Middle]

Finis [End]

Maioritas [Greater]

Aequalitas [Equality]

Minoritas [Lesser]

SUBJECTS	RULES
B Deus [God]	Utrum [Whether?]
C Angelus [Angel]	Quid [What?]
D Homo [Human]	Quare [Why?]
E Coelum [Heavens]	De Quo [From What?]
F Sensitiva [Senses]	Quale [What Kind?]
G Imaginatio [Imagination]	Quantum [How Much?]
H Elementativa [Elements]	Ubi [Where?]
I Vegetativa [Vegetal Power]	Quando [When?]
K Instrumentativa [Skills & Arts]	Quomodo et Cum Quo [How and With What?]

The letter A is reserved to symbolize the coincidence of all the Principles in God. Lull also provides lists of nine Virtues and Vices or of other categories necessary for specialized application of the Great Art. By combining two or three of these letters in circular or tabular diagrams, Lull claimed to generate true formulations of all possible philosophical and theological propositions.

Some modern scholars have wondered whether a formal logical system underlies the combinatory mechanics of Lull's letter symbolism. Others have suggested that the symbolic diagrams of the Great Art serve a mnemonic function. My own study of Lull's logical doctrines finds that they owe little to Aristotelian dialectic or to any algebraic notation. Instead, they apply exhaustively a wide range of analogical, allegorical, proportional, and figural arguments, all marshalled for the single purpose of showing how any philosophical or scientific truth matches or reveals the one truth of Christian doctrine. Successful use of the combinatory mechanics of Lull's Art depends almost completely on correct understanding of the terms signified by the letters, which invariably requires extensive interpretative work, guided by unswerving fidelity to fundamental tenets of Catholic dogma. Lull's Great Art is

perhaps the Middle Age's most ambitious attempt at systematizing the Christian Neoplatonic understanding of all creation as "similar and dissimilar symbols" (*symbola simula et dissimula*) of the Creator. The precedent medieval authority whose work most parallels Ramon Llull's Great Art is perhaps the philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena. Llull combines the universal allegory of Neoplatonist metaphysics with the moral finality of Prescholastic epistemology, in order to create a kind of natural theology with the self-evident force of Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God. This coincidence of ascetic psychology and missionary apologetic undoubtedly reflects the circumstances of Llull's own education.

A more detailed account of Llull's work exceeds the scope of this introduction, especially given the idiosyncrasy and obscurity of so many of his arguments. However, several general features of his method and arguments merit mention here, for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with his work. These features inform all Llull's oeuvre, including the *New Rhetoric*.

First, Ramon Llull almost never cites authorities to support his arguments, preferring instead to rely completely on the various appeals to analogy, congruence, and proportion that he regards as "necessary reasons." In manifestos such as his *Petition to Pope Celestine V* (*Petitio Raymundi pro conversione infidelium ad Coelestinum V papam*) or *Petition of Raymond to the General Council of Vienne* (*Petitio Raymundi in Concilio generah*), he insists that his mode of argumentation can convince infidels, because it relies on reason rather than appeals to authority. He does cite Scripture in his catechetical or apologetic texts, but elsewhere mentions Classical, Christian, or Arab authors only as representatives of their doctrines or schools. Because of Llull's frequent claims to "prove" tenets of the Faith, his writings later attracted the

scrutiny of Inquisition officials who considered his position heretical.

Second, Llull regularly reformulates any philosophical or theological doctrine using the idiosyncratic terminology of his own Great Art. The Principles, Relative Principles, Rules, and Subjects provide the vocabulary for expounding any discipline. Llull especially favors inventing new terms that use sets of standardized suffixes to indicate metaphysical relationships. Thus, he uses the Latin endings *-ivum* (or *-icans*), *-icabile* (or *-icatus*), and *-icare* in order to indicate the innate correlatives of activity, passivity, and action that he claimed to find in every being or phenomenon. For example, the Principle of *Bonitas* (Goodness) found in any subject necessarily includes the correlatives *bonificans* ("goodifying"), *bonificatus* ("goodified"), and *bonificare* ("to goodify"). Developed in stages over the course of his career, his theory of innate correlatives established Trinitarian traces as minimal metaphysical constituents in all beings. The intensively active character of the innate correlatives helps Llull explain the Neoplatonic axiom that "goodness spreads itself" (*bonum diffusivum sui*). However, later Humanist critics of Llull's system especially denounced the barbarous absurdity of his contrived and repetitive terminology.

A third fundamental feature of Llull's work is its pervasive use of exposition through "distinctions" (*distinctiones*). Recent scholarship has demonstrated the tremendous vogue enjoyed after the twelfth century by the lists of word-meanings called "distinctions." Originally compilations of the multiple senses of terms from Scripture, created to assist exegesis, they evolved during the thirteenth century into neat lists of ideas and phrases drawn from texts of moral and natural science alike and systematically organized for ease of consultation by preachers

composing sermons. The prolific use of distinctions in preaching and devotional literature disseminated this device widely in the Latin and vernacular literature created for non-clerical audiences as well. The artful or at least exhaustive exposition of distinctions evidently provided a useful method of invention and composition for a wide range of imaginative and didactic literature, from Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* (organized around the ideas of governing self, family, and kingdom) to John Gower's *Confessio amantis* (organized around the seven mortal sins, which was by far the most used moral distinction). Ramon Llull excels in constructing texts where "one organized system of information, taken as a whole system, is placed in parallel with another, as its equivalent and interpretation." Thus, his *Book of Demonstrations* (*Libre de demostracions*) aptly declares that "the rubrics contained in this book serve as description and as demonstration in this investigation:" its chapter titles constitute an inventory of basic philosophical and theological terminology, which his arguments explicate literally and allegorically as proofs of Christian doctrine. The conclusion to part two of the *New Rhetoric* explicitly specifies the distinctional interpretation of one set of terms with another when it claims that the knowledge expounded there "consists in maintaining proper order among the seven members of this part, through their material, end, and form" (2.7.50). The introduction to part three likewise proposes interpreting the form, material, and end of language with the eighteen Principles of Llull's Great Art (3.0).

Exposition of distinctions is the necessary complement to a fourth basic feature of Ramon Llull's Great Art: this is his pervasive use of moral allegory, or "moralization" as his contemporaries called it. Moralization was a fundamental practice in academic Scriptural exegesis and popular preaching

alike. The diffusion of moralizing interpretation in vernacular didactic literature is obvious in contemporary Spanish works such as Don Juan Manuel's *Count Lucanor* (*El Conde Lucanor*), a collection of exemplary stories that includes several sections devoted to explicating obscure ethical proverbs. Ramon Llull continues these popular applications of tropological allegoresis, rather than academic dissertations of Scriptural exegesis. Where Scholastic commentators on the Bible increasingly explore questions of natural science, Llull treats every level of creation as a source "for knowing and having good moralities."

Finally, the broadly moralizing system of natural theology organized in Llull's Great Art relies fundamentally on the doctrine of moral finality that he usually calls "first and second intentions." These terms indicate the basic obligation of every creature to serve the Creator primarily and all other things secondarily. Llull's doctrine incorporates commonplaces of Christian moral theology from Augustine's famous distinction between use and enjoyment⁴ to Anselm's principles of "ordered love" (*caritas ordinata*), "order" (*ordinatio*), and "rightness" (*rectitudo*). Llull's two intentions correspond best to Avicenna's distinction between the two "faces of the soul," which Franciscan authors especially favored.⁵ Thus the commentary on Ecclesiasticus ascribed to William of Middleton OFM speaks of "two ends" that the soul seeking rectification must observe. Llull's extension of this dichotomy from moral theology to metaphysics is emblematic of how profoundly he moralizes the human understanding of all creation.