

Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

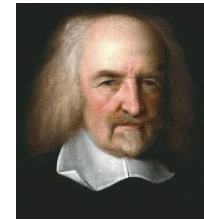
Russell Marcus
Hamilton College
Spring 2012

Class 1 - The Scientific Revolution and Descartes

History of Modern Western Philosophy



- Sixteenth through eighteenth centuries
 - Descartes to Kant
- Medieval philosophy had been dominated by Aristotle's work.
- Descartes and the philosophers who followed attempted to accommodate new learning with a broad view of human abilities, and to construct systematic understandings of the world.
 - Advances in science
 - Criticisms of Church dogma
- Chronological survey
 - Descartes
 - Hobbes
 - Spinoza
 - Leibniz
 - Locke
 - Berkeley
 - Hume
 - Kant



The Standard Narrative

- Epistemological division on whether we are born as blank slates
 - Empiricists (Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) believe that all knowledge comes from experience.
 - Rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz) believe that we are born with knowledge built into our minds.
- The rationalists have a more robust account of the world around us, but rely on contentious assumptions about what we know.
- The empiricists have a more intuitive starting point, but are unable to develop a sufficient account of science.
- Against the Standard Narrative
 - Some of the empiricists don't quite believe in the blank slate theory of the mind
 - The rationalists tend to believe that knowledge is based on sense experience.

Another Account of the Standard Division

different uses of God in philosophy

- The rationalists find a central role for God in their work, while the empiricists do not.
- But this account is also misleading.
- While Descartes and Leibniz rely on the goodness of God to support their views, Spinoza's views on God are subtle.
- Locke's *Essay* contains long sections on scriptural interpretation.
- While Hobbes and Hume were strict materialists, denying the existence of God, Locke and Berkeley were not.

Kant and the End of the Modern Era

- Kant attempts to synthesize the disparate views of the previous two centuries.
- The nineteenth century is characterized by attempts to interpret and extend Kant's work.
- By the twentieth century, European philosophy had more or less fractured into two distinct disciplines.
 - Continental Philosophy
 - Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard
 - Existentialism, deconstructionism, and literary theory
 - Broad questions, often political in nature
 - Anglo-American philosophy
 - Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein
 - Philosophical and conceptual analysis
 - The linguistic turn, then mind and science
- Both continental and analytic philosophers study the history of philosophy, despite their different approaches.
- This course will follow the standard structure of a modern course, but we won't be held to the standard narrative.

Central Themes

- Minds their relations to bodies
- The nature of substance (What is there?)
- The existence of God
- Free will
- The nature of language
- Laws of nature
- Appearance and reality
- The Self

Underlying Central Themes

Metaphysics and Epistemology

- Metaphysics is the study of what exists, and what those things are like.
 - trees, tables, people, planets and stars, electrons, numbers, space-time points, God
 - redness, squareness, velocity, and being located outside of space and time
 - causation, necessity, the relationship between mind and body, and free will and determinism
- Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, of how we know what we know.
 - Does all our knowledge originate in sense experience?
 - Are we born with innate capacities to learn?
 - Are we born with substantial knowledge?

Why Study the History of Philosophy?

- Philosophers are engaged in a search for truth.
 - Is there free will?
 - Is there an external world?
 - How do we acquire knowledge?
 - Does God exist?
 - What actions are morally permissible and impermissible, and why?
- We are like scientists, in desiring correct answers.
- Scientists don't study the history of science in the way that philosophers study the history of philosophy.
 - not central to their own research
 - The physicist's interest in Galileo is historical, rather than scientific.
 - "The current state of things is enough" (68).
- Historicism: our intellectual lives are essentially constituted by our experiences.
 - The concerns of one generation are independent of those of earlier and subsequent generations.
 - Our interests in the history of philosophy can only be historical, and not philosophical.
 - We must be like the physicist in regard to Galileo.

History and the Humanities

- In the humanities, study of the history of a field is integral to the study of that field.
 - Musicians study the history of music.
 - Literature majors study the history of literature.
- Humanities don't centrally aim at the truth, in the way that science and philosophy do.
- The goal of the study of art and literature is to understand a given work:
 - to place it in its historical context,
 - to grasp the culture out of which it is produced,
 - even to enjoy it.
- Philosophy straddles the humanities and the sciences in a puzzling way.
- It is not merely a cultural phenomenon like art or literature.
- Instead, it aims at solving problems, like the sciences.
- Yet, we study history like scholars in the humanities
- Why?

Rosenthal on the History of Philosophy

Our interest in the history of philosophy can not be explained by:

1. Its being a source of ideas for contemporary work;
2. Its being a compendium of errors to avoid;
3. The perspective we gain by seeing a wider diversity of viewpoints than we would in contemporary work;
4. The comprehensive systematicity of some great philosophers;
5. Its use as a source of opponents against which we can contrast our own positions.
6. The understanding of our own questions we gain by examining past questions.

Absurd Views

- Berkeley's claim that there is no material world
- Leibniz's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds
- Hume's claim that we have no knowledge of scientific laws
 - ▶ Such claims, and others, will seem to most of us to be obviously false.
 - ▶ Yet, we are going to evaluate them not merely for their interest, but for their truth.
 - ▶ We are going to look at the arguments, and take them seriously.
 - ▶ "The problem remains of why the study of largely unacceptable theories should be considered crucial to a field whose main aim is to arrive at the truth about certain issues... If...the analogy with mathematics and the sciences is apt...it is doubtful whether the history of philosophy could significantly further philosophical progress" (Rosenthal, "Philosophy and Its History," 160-1).

Three Hints

- First, the broad systems developed by philosophers like the ones we are studying allow us to see connections among areas of interest that are, in contemporary scholarship, often seen only separately.
 - Academia has become increasingly fractured.
 - The great systems-builders wrote comprehensively about natural science, ethics, and metaphysics.
- Second, in order to understand historical work, we have to interpret it through our own beliefs about what is true.
- Third, Rosenthal claims that reading the history of philosophy may provide new approaches to old problems.

Pursuit of Truth

- Rosenthal's most important claim is that in order to understand historical work, we have to interpret it through our own beliefs about what is true.
- Interpreting Berkeley and Leibniz and Hume requires honing our own views about the truth.
- *The Great Conversation*
- All philosophers are contemporaries.
- We are not divided by culture or class or era.
- We are engaged, together, in a singular pursuit of the truth.

Texts

- Required:

- ▶ Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins. *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 2nd edition. Hackett, 2009.
- ▶ Various supplementary handouts, available in class and on the course website.

- Recommended:

- ▶ Norman Melchert. *The Great Conversation, Volume II: Descartes through Derrida and Quine*. Oxford, 2007.
- ▶ Jeffrey Tlumak. *Classical Modern Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge, 2006.

Course Website

http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Course_Websites/Modern_S12/Course_Home.html

Assignments

- Attendance and participation
- Readings
- Panel Presentation (10%)
 - Sign up, by email, after Thursday's class
- Two papers (20%, 25%)
 - First paper is due on February 9
- Midterm and Final Exams (20%, 25%)

Office Hours

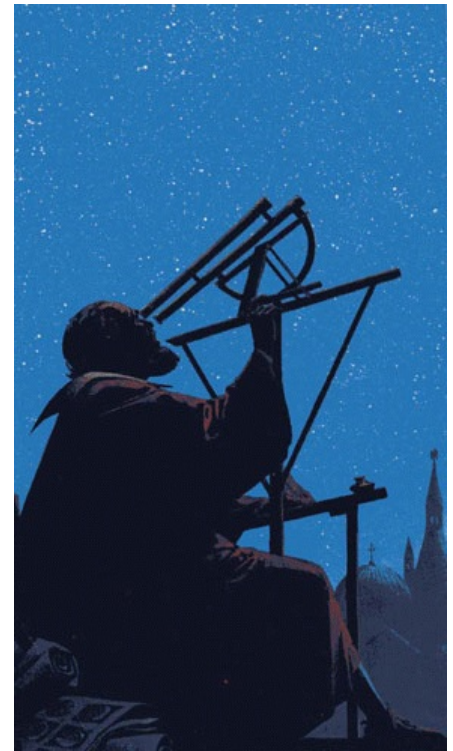
10:30am - noon, Monday through Friday
202 College Hill Road, Upstairs

Questions?

Meditation One

Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences (AW 40).

The Medieval World View



- Descartes is considered the founder of modern philosophy.
mathematician (developing analytic geometry)
scientist (pigs, butchers, anatomy)
- Five dogmas of the medieval world view:
 - D1. The heavens are constant.
 - D2. The Earth is at the center of the universe.
 - D3. Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.
 - Objects tend to fall to the Earth because of their natural tendency toward the center.
 - D4. The heavens contain starry perfect spheres (stars and planets) which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.
 - D5. There are two kinds of motion.
 - On earth motion is linear, in the heavens it is circular.
- D1, D2, and D3 come mainly from Aristotle (384-322 BC).
- D4 and D5 come from mainly Ptolemy (2nd century AD).
The Ptolemaic astronomer saw the sky as an object, rather than a void, like a roof on the Earth.

Against the Dogmas I

D1. The heavens are constant.

D2. The Earth is at the center of the universe.

D3. Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.

D4. The heavens contain starry perfect spheres which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.

D5. There are two kinds of motion.

- In the late 15th century, a new star was discovered.
 - against D1
- Copernicus (1473-1543) hypothesized that earth was not stable, and that it underwent retrograde motion.
 - against D2
- Brahe (1536-1601) discovered that planets move in ellipses.
 - against D2 and D4
- Kepler (1571-1630) urged heliocentrism.
 - against D2

Against the Dogmas II

D1. The heavens are constant.

D2. The Earth is at the center of the universe.

D3. Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.

D4. The heavens contain starry perfect spheres which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.

D5. There are two kinds of motion.

- Galileo (1564-1642) suffered under the Inquisition in 1633 for supporting Kepler's heliocentrism.
 - Jupiter's moons: more than one center of motion, against D2.
 - Bumps on our moon are evidence against D4.
- The theory of inertia
 - Aristotle: rest need not be explained, but motion does.
 - Inertia: rest is merely a limiting case of motion.
- Newton's first law of motion: an object at rest will remain at rest, and an object in motion will remain in (linear) motion, unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.
 - Only acceleration needs an explanation.
 - There is one type of undisturbed motion, linear, for all bodies, against D5.
 - Two forces, gravitation and impetus, are unifying hypotheses which explain all deviations from ordinary linear motion, against D3.

Atomism

- Aristotle and the medievals believed that there were many different kinds of things.
 - Four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water.
 - All natural things have their own natures which make them distinct: flowers are different from trees, from frogs, from people.
- Galileo, Boyle and Descartes built on an earlier atomism (e.g. Democritus)
- According to atomists, all matter is of the same kind.
- All differences among objects can be explained by their differences in structure.
 - If you find it strange that in explaining these elements I do not use the qualities called 'heat', 'cold', 'moisture' and 'dryness' -as the philosophers do - I shall say to you that these qualities themselves seem to me to need explanation. Indeed, unless I am mistaken, not only these four qualities but all the others as well, including even the forms of inanimate bodies, can be explained without the need to suppose anything in their matter other than the motion, size, shape, and arrangement of its parts (Descartes, *The World* CSM I.89).

Against Church Authority

- The Papal Schism (1378-1417) undermined the Church's claim to infallibility.
- Henry VIII severed England's ties with Rome in 1530.
- Charges of corruption by Martin Luther (1483-1546) spurred the Protestant Reformation.
- Calvin (1509-1564) and the Protestant work ethic opposed the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church.
- The Protestants sought a direct relationship between God and man.

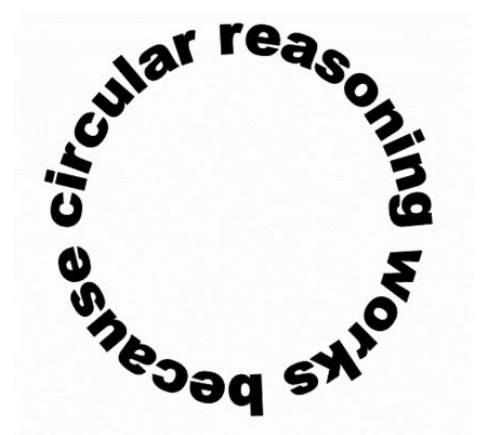
Descartes is a Punk Rocker

- The Mood of the 16th Century
 - Skepticism
 - Humanism
 - Natural reason
 - The scientific method
- The 17th Century is not so different from our own.
 - Increasing skepticism about religion and its explanatory role.
 - There was a rise of relativism, both metaphysical (i.e. the claim that there is no absolute truth) and moral.
 - There was optimism about science and technology.
- Descartes works with a DIY ethos: the individual has a direct relation to the truth.



Scriptural Circularity

I have always thought that two issues - namely, God and the soul, are chief among those that ought to be demonstrated with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For although it suffices for us believers to believe by faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists, certainly no unbelievers seem capable of being persuaded of any religion or even of almost any moral virtue, until these two are first proven to them by natural reason... Granted, it is altogether true that we must believe in God's existence because it is taught in the Holy Scriptures, and, conversely, that we must believe the Holy Scriptures because they have come from God. This is because, of course, since faith is a gift from God, the very same one who gives the grace that is necessary for believing the rest can also give the grace to believe that he exists. Nonetheless, this reasoning cannot be proposed to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular (AW 35).



Letter of Dedication

- A difficult piece to interpret
- *Le Monde*, and Galileo's condemnation
- The letter of dedication is clearly an attempt to appease the Church.
- Some take Descartes's claims in the letter to be insincere.
- Indeed, there are interpretations of Descartes's *Meditations* which impute insincerity to much of its content.
- I will not pursue such interpretations, evaluating the arguments as they are written.