

Class 1 - Introduction to the Early Modern Period

I. Modern Philosophy: Rationalism and Empiricism

The course on which we are embarking is called History of Modern Western Philosophy, but I'll call it Modern, as it is typically called.

The modern era in western philosophy spans the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, starting (roughly) with Descartes, and ending (roughly) with Kant.

It starts a little earlier than what is ordinarily called the Enlightenment, and ends with it.

Descartes is often credited with founding modern philosophy, though he had antecedents like Galileo, Boyle, and Montaigne.

Descartes's work marks the move away from medieval philosophy and science, which had been dominated by Aristotle's work.

Spurred mainly by advances in science, but also by criticisms of Church dogma, Descartes and the philosophers who followed him attempted to accommodate the discoveries of the scientific revolution with a broad view of human abilities, and to construct systematic understandings of the world.

This course mainly surveys, chronologically, the work of eight philosophers of the modern era: Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant.

This course is a standard survey of modern philosophy.

The standard survey has a standard narrative.

According to the standard narrative, there is a stark division among philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on whether we are born as blank slates.

The empiricists (Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) believe that all knowledge comes from experience. The rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz) believe that we are born with knowledge built into our minds.

The rationalists have a more robust account of our knowledge of the world around us, but they 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.

One problem with this characterization of the division is that 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.

Descartes thought of himself foremost as an empirical scientist.

Another account of the division between rationalists and empiricists invokes 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; many people consider him to be an atheist.

On the other side, 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.

Indeed, Berkeley was an Anglican bishop.

Whatever the source of the distinction between empiricism and rationalism, according to the standard narrative, Kant's work, at the end of the eighteenth century, sorts out the whole mess.

Kant does attempt to synthesize the disparate views of the previous two centuries.
His work marks the end of the modern era.

The nineteenth century in western philosophy is characterized mainly by attempts to interpret and extend Kant's work.

By the twentieth century, European philosophy had more or less fractured into two distinct disciplines. French and German philosophy following Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, went toward existentialism, deconstructionism, and literary theory.

So-called continental philosophers tend to focus on broad questions, often political in nature.

In contrast, Anglo-American philosophy followed Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell into philosophical and conceptual analysis.

Analytic philosophers in the twentieth century pursued a linguistic turn, focusing at first on the nature and structure of language.

Analytic philosophy has branched out, especially into questions of the nature of mind and science.

In contemporary philosophy, both continental and analytic philosophers study the history of philosophy, despite their different approaches.

They also both study questions about value, though often in different ways.

(I should also note that the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, while mainly accepted in practice, is at least as contentious as that between empiricists and rationalists.)

Whatever views one has regarding contemporary philosophy, all philosophers now study the history of philosophy through Kant.

This course will thus follow the standard structure of a modern philosophy course.

In combination with *Philosophy 201: History of Ancient Western Philosophy*, this course will provide you a broad background in the history of western philosophy through the eighteenth century.

It will prepare you to study some central themes in more depth, in more contemporary work.

Among these themes are the nature of mind and its relation to the body, free will, and the distinction between appearance and reality.

I will invoke the terms 'empiricist' and 'rationalist' along the way.

But we will not be held to the standard narrative.

II. Central Themes

The central themes of this course are metaphysics and epistemology.

Briefly, metaphysics is the study of what exists, and what those things are like.

Among the things that one might think exist are trees, tables, people, planets and stars, electrons, numbers, space-time points, and God.

Some properties of those things include redness, squareness, velocity, and being located outside of space and time.

Metaphysics is also the study of topics including 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.

Some philosophers believe that all our knowledge originates in sense experience.

Some people believe that we are born with certain innate capacities to learn.

Still others believe that we are born with substantial knowledge already in our minds.

Many of the philosophers of the modern era worked on far more than metaphysics and epistemology.

Descartes was an important physicist and mathematician.

Leibniz developed the calculus.

Hobbes and Locke are important political theorists.

Hume wrote a comprehensive and influential history of England that was a standard source for centuries.

Berkeley wrote a treatise on the health benefits of drinking tar water.

Also, there were lots of other philosophers of the modern era.

We don't have time to study everything our select philosophers wrote, or to study all the significant figures of the time.

I will focus on the metaphysics and epistemology of our eight philosophers.

III. Why Study History?

There is a deep and difficult question about how the study of the history of philosophy prepares us for contemporary work.

In contemporary philosophy, we are engaged in a search for truth, for answers to specific questions, for solutions to particular problems.

In this way, we are like scientists.

But, scientists don't study the history of science in the way that philosophers study the history of philosophy.

When scientists read, say, Galileo's work, they do so as leisure, not as central to their own research.

The physicist's interest in Galileo is historical, rather than scientific.

The problem of why we study the history of philosophy only deepens if we believe that our intellectual lives are essentially constituted by our experiences, that the concerns of one generation are independent of those of earlier and subsequent generations.

That popular view, which one could call historicist, entails that our interests in the history of philosophy can only be historical, and not philosophical.

For the historicist, the philosopher's interest in the history of philosophy can only be like the physicist's interest in Galileo.

In studying the history of philosophy, though, philosophers appear to be more like those who work in the humanities, in which 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.

But, such disciplines 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.

Philosophy seems to straddle 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?

David Rosenthal has written a [thoughtful piece](#) on just this question, which I have put on the [course website](#).

Rosenthal argues, in this article and [elsewhere](#), that 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 whom we can contrast our own positions.
6. The understanding of our own questions we gain by examining past questions.

To put the problem in perspective, this term we are going to examine Berkeley's claim that there is no material world, Leibniz's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds, and 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 historical interest, but for their truth.

We are going to look at the arguments, and take them seriously.

This approach is likely to seem to you, at times, to be absurd.

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).

Rosenthal presents three hints to how one might solve the problem, but I will mostly leave them to you. Briefly, he claims, first, that 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, but the great systems-builders wrote comprehensively about natural science, ethics, and metaphysics.

Second, Rosenthal claims 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.

We read history because it forces us to be clear about our current beliefs.

Last, Rosenthal claims that reading the history of philosophy may provide new approaches to old problems.

One worry about studying the history of philosophy is that our contemporary questions may seem distant from the ones that interested philosophers hundreds of years ago.

I believe that this is not a real problem.

One of our secondary sources, Normal Melchert's book, is called *The Great Conversation* after a view about the nature of philosophy.

On this view, which I share, all philosophers are contemporaries.

Philosophers, as opposed to fiction writers or musicians or even historians, are not divided by culture or class or era.

We are engaged, together, in a singular pursuit of the truth.

IV. The Syllabus

The Ariew and Watkins collection is required, as are many of the handouts available on the [course website](#).

The two secondary sources, Melchert and Tlumak, are optional.

If you have taken the Ancient course, you might have the first Melchert volume, which is really just the first half of a larger, comprehensive work.

We will only cover a few chapters of the second volume of Melchert in this course.

If you don't have it at all, I highly recommend it, independently of this course; the full work is both prettier and less expensive than the two half-volumes.

The Tlumak volume will be more helpful, in more detail, for this course.

Neither the Melchert or the Tlumak are essential, but they are better than Wikipedia and more accessible than the most important philosophy source on the web, the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

V. Starting Descartes

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 (Descartes, Meditation One, AW 40).

Descartes wants something "firm and lasting in the sciences."

We can interpret 'science' broadly, as covering all knowledge.

In this case, we can see his work as consistent with the philosopher's standard pursuit of truth.

We can also see some of his concerns about falsehoods learned in his youth as applying to a narrower, more sophisticated interpretation of 'science'.

This requires some historical background.

VI. The Scientific Revolution, the Protestant Reformation, and the Punk-Rock Descartes

Descartes is considered the founder of modern philosophy.

He was a mathematician (developing analytic geometry) and scientist, in addition to being a philosopher.

He is still a medieval, though, in many ways.

Descartes's worries about his false beliefs arise in large part from his medieval education, both in science and theology.

Consider five dogmas, or teachings, 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.

E.g. 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 natural motion.

On earth motion is linear, in the heavens it is circular.

The first three of these dogmas come mainly from Aristotle (384-322 BC).

The fourth and fifth 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.

The new science of the sixteenth century had undermined all five of these dogmas.

In the late 15th century, a new star was discovered, which undermined D1.

Copernicus (1473-1543) hypothesized that earth is not stable, and that it undergoes retrograde motion, against D2.

Brahe (1536-1601) discovered that planets move in ellipses, against D2 and D4.

Kepler (1571-1630) urged heliocentrism, against D2.

Galileo (1564-1642) suffered under the Inquisition in 1633 for supporting Kepler's heliocentrism.

His discovery of Jupiter's moons meant that there is more than one center of motion, against D2.

His discovery of bumps on moon is evidence against D4.

Further, Galileo began to develop a theory of inertia on which rest is merely a limiting case of motion.

On the Aristotelian view, rest need not be explained, but motion does; rest is the consequence of an object's fulfilment of its telos, of its goal.

The inertial view of the new science was improved by Descartes and Newton, resulting in 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.

According to the law of inertia, only acceleration needs an explanation.

So, 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.

More philosophically, Aristotle and the medievals believed that there were many different kinds of things.

At root, there are four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Additionally, 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 (of Democritus, say).

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).

On the new science, the Earth and its inhabitants lose our privileged place in the center of the world.

Adding to Descartes's belief that he had many false opinions were direct attacks on religion, and its role in medieval thought.

There had been a general weakening of Church authority in the two centuries preceding Descartes.

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 in favor of a more direct relationship between God and man.

Philosophical skepticism became popular in the sixteenth century, in large part as a reaction to the undermining of Church authority.

The scientific revolution and Protestant Reformation together supported the rise of the individual against central authority, in the guise of humanism, natural reason, and scientific method.

Descartes's work is rooted in the individualism of the era, as a reaction to the authority of the Church.

The 17th Century is not so different from our own.

There was an 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.

Anachronistically, we can see Descartes as working with a punk-rock, DIY ethos: the individual has a direct relation to the truth.

Descartes responds to a more specific skeptical worry in his letter of dedication: the problem of 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).

The letter of dedication to the *Meditations* is a difficult piece to interpret.

Descartes had cancelled publication of his broad treatise on the new science, *Le Monde*, in response to Galileo's condemnation by the Inquisition.

The letter of dedication is clearly an attempt to appease the Church.

Some take Descartes's claims of faith in the letter, like his claim that circularity is not a problem for believers, 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.