Background to Early Modern Philosophy

Philosophy 22
Winter, 2020
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Modern Philosophy

- The “modern” period in Western philosophy began in the seventeenth century.
- In its primary sense, “modern” philosophy is contrasted with ancient and medieval philosophy.
- Much of present-day philosophy can still be classified as “modern” (though some call it “post-modern”).
- The first two centuries of modern philosophy are often called the “early modern” period.
Medieval Philosophy

• The philosophy of the Middle Ages was dominated by Roman Catholicism
• There was some Arabic influence
• Much of the philosophy of the period was done at Catholic universities and was concerned with classic problems
• This mode of philosophy was called “scholastic” and its late versions were a main target of modern philosophy
Theological Philosophy

- The primary topic in medieval philosophy was the relation between God and man.
  - How does the human mind comprehend God’s nature and existence?
  - What is the purpose of the world and the events that take place within it?
  - Is human freedom compatible with divine foreknowledge?
  - How are nature in general, and human nature in particular, to be understood as the creations of God?
Settling Disputes

- The scholastic philosophers backed their disputations by appeal to:
  - Scriptural authority
  - Official doctrines of the Catholic Church, especially the reports of Church councils
  - The doctrines of Aristotle (after the mid-thirteenth century)
  - Human reason (the “light of nature,” as opposed to the “light of faith”)
  - Sensory experience
Natural Philosophy

- Late scholastic natural philosophy was based on Aquinas’s adaptation of the natural philosophy of Aristotle
- Aristotle conceived all of nature on the model of the biological organism
- The primary mode of explanation of natural phenomena was teleological and qualitative
- Few investigations in natural philosophy were carried out quantitatively
The Renaissance

- The Renaissance (14th through 16th centuries) was the period of transition from medieval to modern philosophy.
- There was renewed study of the works of ancient philosophers besides Aristotle.
- Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and skepticism were alternatives to the prevailing Aristotelianism.
- Natural philosophy was invigorated.
The Protestant Reformation

• Martin Luther (1483-1546) sparked a revolt against the Catholic Church when he posted his 95 theses on a church door (1517)
  - Luther preached that individual conscience trumps the authority of the Church
  - Redemption cannot be gained by “good works”

• Jean Calvin (1509-1564) was a force behind political revolution
  - Calvin claimed that salvation or damnation are predestined
The “Copernican Revolution”

• The dominant astronomical theory in the Middle Ages was the geocentric theory of Claudius Ptolemy (circa 85-165)

• In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) published a new heliocentric theory

• He claimed its superiority both in theoretical simplicity and in practical accuracy

• The Catholic Church censored the book and removed references to the reality of the motion of the earth
Galileo

- Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was a vocal advocate of the Copernican theory who was censored for arguing that the earth moves.
- He ridiculed the reliance of the Catholic Church on the teachings of Aristotle.
- He built a telescope and discovered sunspots, the phases of Venus, the rings of Saturn, and the moons of Jupiter.
- He introduced precise quantitative methods into physics.
The Skeptical Crisis

- The Reformation had raised the question of the ultimate authority for religious belief
  - Individual conscience?
  - The Roman Catholic Church?
- There seemed to be no higher authority able to resolve this dispute without engendering an infinite regress or begging the question
- The same problem arises in disputes between science and religion, as well as among philosophers
Fideism

- Some thinkers tried to turn the skeptical problem into an argument for religious faith.
- Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) argued that the infirmity of reason and the senses leaves us no option but to submit to authority, both secular and religious.
- The threat to reason posed by skepticism and fideism was a major problem faced by defenders of the new science of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo.
The Philosophers

• We will read from the works of the following:
  - René Descartes (1596-1650)
  - Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)
  - Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)
  - John Locke (1632-1704)
  - George Berkeley (1685-1753)
  - David Hume (1711-1776)
  - Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
Other 17\textsuperscript{th} Century Philosophers

- Noteworthy philosophers of the seventeenth century
  - Francis Bacon (1561-1626)
  - Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)
  - Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655)
  - Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694)
  - Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)
  - Robert Boyle (1627-1691)
  - Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715)
  - Isaac Newton (1643-1727)
  - Pierre Bayle (1647-1706)
Other 18\textsuperscript{th} Century Philosophers

- Noteworthy philosophers of the eighteenth century
  - Joseph Butler (1692-1752)
  - Christian Wolff (1679-1754)
  - François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778)
  - Francis Hutcheson (1697-1746)
  - Thomas Reid (1710-1796)
  - Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
  - Denis Diderot (1713-1784)
  - Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)
Female Philosophers

• The early modern period saw the first flourishing of philosophical work by women
  - Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680)
  - Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673)
  - Anne Conway (1631-1678)
  - Damaris Cudworth (1659-1708)
  - Mary Astell (1666-1731)
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