Background to
Early Modern Philosophy

Philosophy 22
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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 (14\textsuperscript{th} through 16\textsuperscript{th} 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
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)