



Background to Early Modern Philosophy

Philosophy 22
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G. J. Matthey

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 17th 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 18th 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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