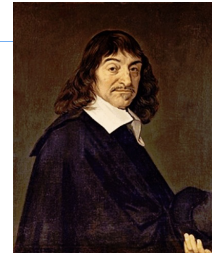


Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Hamilton College
Spring 2010

**Class 1 - The Scientific Revolution and Descartes
Plus, Introductory Material**

History of Modern Western Philosophy



- Sixteenth through the 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
 - Spinoza
 - Leibniz
 - Locke
 - Berkeley
 - Hume
 - Kant



The Standard Narrative

- Epistemological division on whether we are born as blank slates
 - Empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume)
 - Rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz)
- The rationalists have a more-convincing metaphysics, but rely on contentious assumptions about what we know.
- The empiricists have a clean epistemology, but empiricism leads to skepticism.
- But
 - 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 attempt at division: the role of God.
 - Rationalists find a central role for God in their work
 - Empiricists do not.
 - But:
 - 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

Metaphysics and epistemology (M&E)

- Metaphysics is the study of what exists, and what those things are like.
 - trees, tables, people, electrons, numbers, space-time points, and 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?
- 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, and will prepare you to study these central themes in more depth, in more contemporary work.

Why Study the History of Philosophy?

- Philosophers are engaged in a search for truth.
 - ▶ answers to specific questions
 - ▶ solutions to particular problems
 - ▶ We are like scientists.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 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

- On website
- See the introduction and sections III and IV, especially pp 158-163.
- Rosenthal argues 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 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, 160-1).

Pursuit of Truth

- Rosenthal's solution 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_S10/Course_Home.html

Assignments

- Attendance and participation
- Readings
- Presentation (10%)
- Two papers (20%, 25%)
- Midterm and Final Exams (20%, 25%)

Office Hours

10:30am - noon, Monday through Friday
210 College Hill Road, Room 201

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 this 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)
 - But still a medieval
- 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.
 - 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 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

- 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
- Galileo (1564-1642) suffered under the Inquisition in 1633 for supporting Kepler's heliocentrism.
 - One type of motion for all bodies, against D5.
 - Gravity was a unifying hypothesis which explained all motion, against D3.
 - Jupiter's moons meant that there was more than one center of motion, against D2.
 - Bumps on moon is evidence against D4.
- The Earth had lost its place in the center of the world.

D1. The heavens are constant.
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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.

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 believes 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.