Early Modern Philosophy
Setting the Scene: Historical Context 1618-1815

I. Early modern philosophy flourished in the period framed by the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon (1792-1815). The former marked both the culmination and conclusion of the wars of religion between Catholicism and Protestantism that began in the 16th century. Its primary results, besides ensuring the survival of Protestantism, were the devastation of central Europe (from which substantial portions of Germany did not fully recover until the next century) and the establishment of France as the leading power in continental Europe (in place of Habsburg Spain; French military preeminence endured until 1870). Also during this period Britannia came to rule the waves.

Subsequent wars led to the establishment of Prussia as the second great military power in Europe in the later part of the eighteenth century, as well as the decline of the threat from Ottoman Turkey in eastern and southern Europe. Italy and Germany both remained divided and weak during the early modern period; their unification as nation-states did not occur until the second half of the nineteenth century. Russia began its rise and became a power to be reckoned with in Europe.

The Civil War (1640s), the Cromwellian Protectorate (1650s), the "Glorious Revolution" (1688), and the Hanoverian Succession (1715) were decisive events in the formation of the modern British state.

II. The seventeenth century saw the rise of Holland as a leading commercial and naval power, as well as a center of European culture: Descartes and Locke were granted refuge there, and Spinoza belonged to a great cultural flowering that included Rembrandt and Vermeer. The other country that enjoyed a brief period of eminence was Sweden, whose king saved the Protestant cause in the Thirty Years War, bequeathing to his successors "great power status" in Germany and the Baltic region (this ended with the defeat of the Swedes by Tsar Peter the Great in 1709).

In the eighteenth century, Scotland became a center of Enlightenment culture; its two leading lights were David Hume and Adam Smith.

III. The seventeenth century marked a definitive shift of the commercial center of Europe from the Mediterranean (especially Italy) to the northwest: Holland, northern France, and England. One expression of their new eminence was the establishment of great commercial empires in Asia and N. America by private companies and royal grantees (centrally administered national empires were a 19th century phenomenon).

IV. The early modern period was the age of absolute monarchy (France, Prussia, Russia), as well as of the emergence of limited monarchy and republican experiments (England, Holland, the United States of America), culminating in the French Revolution (1789).

V. The Enlightenment was the most important cultural event of the early modern period. Its center was France, where Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau coexisted uncomfortably with absolute monarchy. In central and eastern Europe, reform was imposed from above, as monarchs such as Frederick the Great (Prussia), Catherine the Great (Russia), and Joseph II (Holy Roman Empire) sought to centralize power and modernize their realms. They, as well as lesser princelings, also had a serious interest in the arts, which they not only supported but often participated in themselves as writers or composers. In Britain, Enlightenment had many sources and owed little to central authority (other than benign neglect).

VI. The single most important contribution of the early modern period to human development was in science. After Galileo and Kepler came Newton, perhaps the greatest scientist of all time; his *Principia* became the model for all science to come. Newton also invented calculus, itself the culmination of a great renaissance in mathematics to which philosophers like Descartes, Pascal, and Leibniz (co-inventor of calculus) made major contributions. In the eighteenth century, Euler and Gauss brought mathematics to the threshold of its contemporary power and sophistication. Astronomy, aided by new inventions such as the telescope, made enormous progress during this period. Chemistry emerged from the shadow of

alchemy and attained the status of a science at the end of the eighteenth century through the work of Lavoisier, Priestly, and Dalton. Finally, the ground was laid for a scientific understanding of our planet and its life by advances in geology, climate studies, the invention of the microscope, comparative anatomy, the discovery and understanding of the fossil remains of extinct creatures, and scientific expeditions to remote parts of the world where undreamt-of geological formations, flora, and fauna were encountered.

VII. Technological progress, together with theoretical advances in the sciences, transformed people's sense of their place in the universe. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Copernican heliocentric model had displaced the geocentric, while in the eighteenth century it was becoming increasingly evident not only that our solar system was merely one of many in a vast galaxy, but that even our galaxy might be only one of countless others spread across the boundless reaches of space (Kant was the first to give scientific expression to this possibility).

Just as the telescope revealed the vastness of the macrocosm, the microscope disclosed the existence of innumerable microcosms in the air, in every drop of water. It also revealed the incredible sophistication and homogeneity of organic structure, including the human body: all were formed from tiny living individuals, called cells, similar to free-floating microorganisms.

Under the pressure of such discoveries, ancient attitudes were subjected to strains of unprecedented severity: our marginality and insignificance in the universe at large; the extreme age, volatility, and variety of the surface of our planet; the mind-boggling complexity of our own bodies; the undreamt of range and variety of life; the discovery that all life is formed from the same building-blocks and structures; etc.

VIII. Although this was the time during which natural science came of age, it was, from a technological standpoint, little superior to preceding eras. Medical knowledge was still in its infancy; chemistry only emerged from alchemy at the end of the eighteenth century; the Industrial Revolution did not make its effects felt widely and deeply until the nineteenth century; standards of hygiene, public works, administration, and law remained primitive by modern standards. Nevertheless, the foundations for our bureaucratic, technological, market-driven world were laid during this time.

Universities were established or expanded in order to train the bureaucrats necessary to administer increasingly centralized states; the need for record-keeping of unprecedented detail and sophistication for purposes of taxation and the increasingly complex forms of property-holding (including the invention of what eventually became the corporation) led to the intrusive expansion of the bureaucracy into hitherto untouched areas of life; invention and research began to be fostered by the state (mainly to improve the technology of war, but also for the sake of mining, navigation, and eventually manufactures); and a modern sense of nationhood began to form.

IX. The early modern period was a match for the Renaissance in the quality of artistic production. The seventeenth century was the age of the Baroque, the eighteenth of Rococo. In addition to its long-established preeminence in the visual arts, Italy introduced a new art form, opera, in the early seventeenth century, which quickly swept through the theatres of Europe, establishing an Italian domination in this field that lasted into the twentieth century. Architecture flourished thanks to the cascade of wealth into northern Europe and the rise of spendthrift absolute monarchs intent on glorifying themselves. The novel was born and eventually came to rival poetry as the leading literary form (great novelists included Cervantes, Mme. de Lafayette, Defoe, Fielding, Rousseau, and Laclos; while Milton, Pope, Goethe, and Schiller were the outstanding poets of the age). Drama entered a new golden age, launched by Shakespeare, continued by Moliere, Racine, and Corneille, and culminating in the *Faust* of J. W. Goethe. Music reached its apogee with the works of Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, etc.

Economic theory (Hume, Adam Smith), political theory (Locke, Rousseau), history (Hume, Gibbon), law (Montesquieu), and the other social sciences underwent enormous advancement and transformation, some very nearly attaining their contemporary form.

X. Religion remained a strong force in the lives of individuals and continued to exercise a powerful influence on states. Nevertheless, nothing so distinguishes the modern age as the taming of religion, its demotion to secondary importance in the affairs of western Europe and North America. Dynastic expansion, economic rivalry, and eventually nationalism began to eclipse it. Enlightenment skepticism and the French Revolution even brought many to view religion as an enemy of progress and the material well-being of “the people”.