

INTRODUCTION

1. This course is a historical introduction to philosophy, focusing on one of the three main “ages” of philosophy, the Modern, the other two being Ancient (mainly Greek but also Chinese and Indian) and Medieval (Christian, Islamic, and Jewish philosophy through the Renaissance).

The **modern period** is usually dated from the first unquestionably great modern thinker, **Rene Descartes**. It lasts till - well, we are still in it, by most reckonings - but let us for convenience sake put the end-point at the mid-twentieth century, when the last undisputed philosophical masterpiece was published: **Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations***.

2. Read syllabus.

3. An explosion of philosophical work occurred during the modern period relative to the Medieval Age, but the greatest productions, those most likely to endure, are those of the early modern period with which this course deals. Indeed, it is probably the single greatest Age in the history of philosophy, world-wide.

Early modern divides into:

- I) Rationalism (heyday: 1640-1700): Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz; also Arnauld, Malebranche, and Wolff.
- II) Empiricism (heyday: 1690-1780): Locke, Berkeley, Hume; also Hobbes and Reid.
- III) Transcendental idealism (heyday: 1780-1800): Kant; also Fichte.
- IV) Important thinkers who don’t fit into these categories include: Pascal, Vico, Rousseau.

4. Inspired by ancient thinkers like Plato, many 17th century philosophers looked to pattern philosophical knowledge after mathematical: the same rigorous order of reasons and consequences, the same certainty and independence of all contingency, that could be found in Euclid, these thinkers sought to bring to philosophy. Because they rated knowledge based on reason alone over knowledge dependent on sense experience, these philosophers have come to be known as **Rationalists**. And some of them were in fact among the greatest mathematicians of all time: **Descartes** (introduced the coordinate system, which revolutionized algebraic approaches to geometry) and **Leibniz** (co-inventor of calculus); and though **Spinoza** was not a major mathematician himself, he modeled his philosophy on Euclid’s *Geometry*, a radical break with previous ways of ordering philosophical reasoning into a system.

5. Since rationalists sometimes went to great extremes in placing their trust in philosophical reason as against the evidence of their senses, there was an **empiricist** backlash, which finally gained the upper hand with **John Locke**. For empiricists, philosophy is radically distinct from mathematics, and must glean up its facts from experience and reflection on experience in the same laborious, piece-meal way characteristic of the *naturalist*; the philosopher logs, catalogues, and finally endeavors to explain the order of things on the basis of the facts, not arcane theories or abstract principles which take us far beyond the conclusions our data permit.

Of course, Empiricism is as old as philosophy itself. What Locke did that was innovative

was to make human understanding - the instrument of knowledge - the principal focus of philosophical inquiry: an inquiry that could only take place empirically, the basis of the modern science of psychology.

Locke had two great successors, first **George Berkeley** and then **David Hume**, who set the limits of the human capacity to think and know ever narrower, until human understanding came to be viewed as simply one among many varieties of mammalian understanding.

6. With Hume, empiricism became all but indistinguishable from skepticism. To the question what can we know about reality insofar as it transcends the limits of what experience can teach us, the answer seems to be: nothing at all. Since transcendent knowledge - of God, freedom, immortality, etc. - is precisely what metaphysics had already pretended to be able to supply, the result of empiricism was to put the very possibility of metaphysics itself in question.

7. A major crisis loomed. **Immanuel Kant** is the first philosopher to have recognized the source of the crisis, and he developed a philosophy, **transcendental idealism**, designed to overcome it, with the aim of setting philosophy on the road of science along which mathematics and physics had preceded it. Few accept that Kant achieved this, but his masterpiece, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, is generally reckoned the greatest philosophical work of the millenium, and quite possibly of all time.

8. The modern period is far too vast to survey in one course; so our focus will be on the **early modern period through Kant** (end of 18th century). See my list of the preeminent philosophers of the modern era, whose stature has at least survived their death.

9. With the exception of Locke, the thinkers I have selected to cover most thoroughly in this course are distinguished by their ability to write clearly and accessibly: Descartes, Berkeley, and Hume. Less emphasis will be given to other philosophers we will be reading because their works are either arcane, presuppose too much knowledge, and/or are prolix: Spinoza, and Leibniz. I include Locke and Kant because each of them is simply too pivotal to the early modern period, and all philosophy that followed them (even in reaction/rejection of their doctrines). Kant is far and away the most difficult of early modern thinkers, but we will attempt to at least 'get your feet wet' in his critical project.

10. The criterion for inclusion in this course is the importance of a philosopher's contribution to topics that were then termed first philosophy: metaphysics, philosophy of mind, theory of knowledge. Thus, we shall not be considering the work of philosophers who excelled in other areas but not in these: **Rousseau** and **Hobbes**, great political philosophers; **Hutcheson**, an important ethicist; **Schleiermacher**, an important philosopher of religion; and so on.

And, unfortunately, we will not be able to consider the ethical, political, religious, and aesthetic philosophy of the philosophers whom we will be considering in this course.

11. It is purely time constraints that prevent us from going beyond Kant. The first post-Kantian thinker of true greatness is **Hegel**, who, of all philosophers, may be the single most difficult to understand (his writing is considerably more impenetrable than Kant's, which is saying something).

Hegel is important above all for his *Science of Logic* and *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which he attempted to develop a philosophical standpoint capable of integrating and surpassing both ancient Greek philosophy and modern philosophy. It has a certain megalomania about it, yet remains completely honest, and truly changed the course of philosophy afterwards.

12. Both Marx and Kierkegaard are unthinkable without Hegel. Marxism, philosophically speaking, is above all a development of Hegel's ideas and methods. Kierkegaard's religious thought aspires to an anti-Hegelian synthesis of philosophy (both ancient and modern) with religion, with philosophy now subordinated to religion.

13. Thinkers like Marx and Kierkegaard, and later Nietzsche, were decidedly non-mainstream. We remember them because the mainstream of philosophy, at this time, was distinctly bland by comparison with the philosophical "golden age" of the period from Descartes through Kant and Hegel. Its most important thinkers are something less than momentous: J.S. Mill, Auguste Comte, or Ludwig Feuerbach, but no thinker of the first rank of the traditional kind.

14. Meanwhile, science and mathematics grew phenomenally, modern technological society became a reality, education expanded with it, and Darwin happened.

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, philosophy was ready for renewal, the need to catch up with the transformed society and science of the period, and this was done first and foremost by the transformation of logic, unchanged essentially since Aristotle, by a new formalism that connected up directly with contemporary work in the sciences.

15. At the same time, a rift gradually opened up in philosophy: those philosophers who saw themselves as continuous with the tradition, and those who saw themselves part of the beginning of something new - the successor discipline to philosophy in much the same sense in which chemistry was the successor to alchemy.

The rift has a geographical locus, the English Channel; however, both sides stemmed from different strands of German philosophical thought. [*In the early modern period, France dominated the 17th century, England the 18th, and Germany the 19th.*]

On the anglophone side of the rift (Britain, North America, other English speaking countries), philosophy became focused on the **logical analysis of mathematics and language**, a tendency pioneered by German-speaking thinkers like Frege, Wittgenstein, and the Vienna Circle. The other side of the rift (Germans and Latins: French, Italians, and the Spanish speaking world) focused on themes drawn from the **human sciences** - sociology and history (Max Weber), linguistics as done on the European continent (Saussure), psychoanalysis, and psychology. The greatest representatives of this side of the philosophical divide are Martin Heidegger, and, to a lesser extent, Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

16. Other handout.

History handout: some context for the early modern period, which is as eventful in the sciences and every other field of human endeavor as it was in philosophy.

17. So, why study history of philosophy in the modern period? Answers:
- a) academic--steppingstone for later phil. studies. Nec. niche in humanities degree.
 - b) philosophically interesting (touch on fund'l themes)
 - 1) prob of reality--metaphysics/ontology: what exists? what are 1st principles & causes? cosmology
 - 2) prob of mind: it's nature, limits. mind/body problem.
 - 3) epist/prob. of knowledge: what is it to have a representation of the world? How are such beliefs, such as those contained in judgments about the world, justified?
 - c) third reason: the "transcendental" significance of modern philosophical 'fundamental frameworks'. The engine driving these philosophical positions are certain world views, or ways of organizing the way the world is. JP sees three of these operating since the 1600s, as will be discussed next time.