Characteristics of Modern Philosophy

It is not easy to indicate with absolute precision what marks off modern philosophy from its predecessors, classical, medieval and Renaissance philosophy. The typical view focuses on the shift from epistemology to metaphysics. According to this interpretation, modern philosophy requires we first solve the problems specific to epistemology before we move on other areas of philosophical thought. Thus, metaphysics is no longer “first philosophy,” epistemology is. Now, since philosophy is essentially a critical exercise that poses problems and methods to solve them, the epistemological problems of modern philosophy go hand in hand with the question of method. Specifically, the question is which method appropriately attains the required level of certainty.

Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon were among the first philosophers to carry out this project in the early seventeenth century. Perhaps you are more familiar with Descartes’ dictum/argument, “I think, therefore I am,” which is an epistemological statement. However, it is also an anthropological statement through the use two first person singular pronouns: I think; I am. They reveal another characteristic of modern philosophy which carried over from the Renaissance, namely, its emphasis on the individual.

Three important historical events would have a profound impact on modern philosophy: the voyages of “discovery,” the advent of modern science and the Protestant reformation and its ensuing religious wars. The interaction of philosophy and modern science is especially complex, since many early modern scientists considered themselves philosophers and even thought that these two studies were one. In the end, these two disciplines would separate, but the epistemological and methodological issues of modern philosophy were intimately tied to the question of certainty in the sciences. Modern philosophy was also at the forefront of how to interpret and evaluate the “noble savage” and how to understand the question of religion and its relation to government.

As usual, this view has its critics. Some would say that ancient philosophy is misunderstood if metaphysics is somehow posited as a first philosophy. The division of philosophy into branches is simply an expositional device. Others would say the Renaissance Humanists stressed the individual well before Descartes did. Regardless of these critiques, the traditional view does have its merits. The turn towards epistemology and the focus on the individual are parts of a larger picture.

Two things are behind the epistemological turn: the desire to recapture the independence of philosophical thought after centuries of dogmatic captivity and the rise of modern science. For much of the High Middle Ages philosophy worked within the scholastic tradition. It centered on the faith-reason debate, the faith of Christianity and the reason, usually, of Aristotle. Both Christianity and Christianized Aristotelian philosophy were highly dogmatic. Interestingly, the first major challenge to authority came from thinkers we now call scientists. We are all familiar with Copernicus’ revolutionary theory and Galileo’s physics. Copernicus did not publish his book while alive; Galileo did publish his in life and paid the price for it. The shift towards epistemology should be seen in light of the broader anti-authoritarian spirit of the age. Modern philosophy and modern science were partners in crime, so to speak. Soon, though, modern science would also challenge philosophical thought with its own version
of validity. In fact, much of modern philosophy is heavily influenced by the scientific thought—just as contemporary philosophy is today.

Individualism can also be understood as a reaction to dogmatism and authority. However, a third element needs to be considered, since Christianity and Christianized philosophy were also wed to political authority. The steady rise of the bourgeoisie would challenge this trio of power. The political and economic situation of Modern Europe would have an influence on philosophical thought, mainly on ethics and political philosophy. (Here we have another example of the social and historical nature of philosophy.) In the final analysis though, the epistemological turn and individualism are two sides of the same coin: they are both manifestations of a desire to free philosophy from dogmatism.

Choosing the seventeenth century as the starting point for modern philosophy is also problematic. Bruno was certainly anti-authoritarian, Telesio’s epistemology seems rather modern and scientific, and there is more than a hint of individualism in Della Mirandola’s “seeds” of possibility. What makes the seventeenth century unique is the clarity with which questions of epistemology and method become preeminent. The debate between empiricism and rationalism takes full force within this context. Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*, which until the late eighteenth century was the basis for all physics, was published in 1687. The connection between philosophy and science can be seen in the complete title: *Philosophiae Naturalis Princípiá Mathemáticá*. Its effect on the philosophy would remain enormous for almost two centuries. The seventeenth century, the century of method, seems like a good starting point. We will begin with Francis Bacon and then René Descartes since their philosophies highlight the contrast between empiricism and rationalism and the methods connected to them.

**Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626)**

Bacon was a lawyer, Member of Parliament, and Queen’s Counsel who wrote on a variety of topics. He is best known, though, for his empiricist views on natural philosophy in *The Advancement of Learning* and the *Novum Organum*. Bacon’s views on natural philosophy can be presented on three different fronts: as a challenge to earlier thinkers, particularly Aristotle, as a new tool for the advancement of learning, and as something more than an intellectual exercise.

Bacon believed philosophy was lacking a comprehensive theory of science or knowledge. Aristotle, Plato, the scholastics, and the Humanists had not been able to come up with one. They were either based on deductive reasoning or persisted in dialectical disputes that hunted “more after words than matter.” Universities simply kept the tradition alive. Bacon believed the advances in science had made all these theories obsolete. Not even Telesio had hit the mark. Natural philosophy, he thinks, must not be mixed with any ideas we have of the divine. With regards to Aristotle, he specifically criticized his logic, “which is based on his metaphysical theory, whereby the false doctrine is implied that the experience which comes to us by means of our senses (things...
as they appear) automatically presents to our understanding things as they are. Simultaneously Aristotle favors the application of general and abstract conceptual distinctions, which do not conform to things as they exist. Bacon, however, introduces his new conception of philosophia prima as a meta-level for all scientific disciplines.” Bacon’s new tool for philosophy is best expressed in his work which goes by that name in Latin, the Novum Organum.

The Novum Organum is a collection of one hundred and eighty-two aphorisms laid out in two books. Here are the introductory remarks:

Those who have taken upon them to lay down the law of nature as a thing already searched out and understood, whether they have spoken in simple assurance or professional affectation, have therein done philosophy and the sciences great injury. For as they have been successful in inducing belief, so they have been effective in quenching and stopping inquiry; and have done more harm by spoiling and putting an end to other men’s efforts than good by their own. Those on the other hand who have taken a contrary course, and asserted that absolutely nothing can be known — whether it were from hatred of the ancient sophists, or from uncertainty and fluctuation of mind, or even from a kind of fullness of learning, that they fell upon this opinion — have certainly advanced reasons for it that are not to be despised; but yet they have neither started from true principles nor rested in the just conclusion, zeal and affectation having carried them much too far. The more ancient of the Greeks (whose writings are lost) took up with better judgment a position between these two extremes — between the presumption of pronouncing on everything, and the despair of comprehending anything; and though frequently and bitterly complaining of the difficulty of inquiry and the obscurity of things, and like impatient horses champing at the bit, they did not the less follow up their object and engage with nature, thinking (it seems) that this very question — viz., whether or not anything can be known — was to be settled not by arguing, but by trying. And yet they too, trusting entirely to the force of their understanding, applied no rule, but made everything turn upon hard thinking and perpetual working and exercise of the mind.

Now my method, though hard to practice, is easy to explain; and it is this. I propose to establish progressive stages of certainty. The evidence of the sense, helped and guarded by a certain process of correction, I retain. But the mental operation which follows the act of sense I for the most part reject; and instead of it I open and lay out a new and certain path for the mind to proceed in, starting directly from the simple sensuous perception. The necessity of this was felt, no doubt, by those who attributed so much importance to logic, showing thereby that they were in search of helps for the understanding, and had no confidence in the native and spontaneous process of the mind. But this remedy comes too late to do any good, when the mind is already, through the daily intercourse and conversation of life, occupied with unsound doctrines and beset on all sides by vain imaginations. And therefore that art of logic, coming (as I said) too late to the rescue, and no way able to set matters right again, has had the effect of fixing errors rather than disclosing truth. There remains but one course for the recovery of a sound and healthy condition — namely, that the entire work of the understanding be commenced afresh, and the mind itself be from the very outset not left to take its own course, but guided at every step; and the business be done as if by machinery. Certainly if in things mechanical men had set to work with their naked hands, without help or force of instruments, just as in things intellectual they have set to work with little else than the naked forces of the understanding, very small would the matters have been which, even with their best efforts applied in conjunction, they
could have attempted or accomplished. Now (to pause a while upon this example and
look in it as in a glass) let us suppose that some vast obelisk were (for the decoration
of a triumph or some such magnificence) to be removed from its place, and that men
should set to work upon it with their naked hands, would not any sober spectator think
them mad? And if they should then send for more people, thinking that in that way
they might manage it, would he not think them all the madder? And if they then
proceeded to make a selection, putting away the weaker hands, and using only the
strong and vigorous, would he not think them madder than ever? And if lastly, not
content with this, they resolved to call in aid the art of athletics, and required all their
men to come with hands, arms, and sinews well anointed and medicated according to
the rules of the art, would he not cry out that they were only taking pains to show a
kind of method and discretion in their madness? Yet just so it is that men proceed in
matters intellectual — with just the same kind of mad effort and useless combination
of forces — when they hope great things either from the number and cooperation or
from the excellency and acuteness of individual wits; yes, and when they endeavor by
logic (which may be considered as a kind of athletic art) to strengthen the sinews of
the understanding, and yet with all this study and endeavor it is apparent to any true
judgment that they are but applying the naked intellect all the time; whereas in every
great work to be done by the hand of man it is manifestly impossible, without
instruments and machinery, either for the strength of each to be exerted or the
strength of all to be united.

This is Bacon’s argument in favor of a new intellectual tool that can help the mind avoid
dogmatism and skepticism. Here is the basic outline of his method and how it compares
to deductive reasoning.

XI
As the sciences which we now have do not help us in finding out new works, so neither
does the logic which we now have help us in finding out new sciences.

XII
The logic now in use serves rather to fix and give stability to the errors which have
their foundation in commonly received notions than to help the search after truth. So it
does more harm than good.

XIII
The syllogism is not applied to the first principles of sciences, and is applied in vain to
intermediate axioms, being no match for the subtlety of nature. It commands assent
therefore to the proposition, but does not take hold of the thing.

XIV
The syllogism consists of propositions, propositions consist of words, words are
symbols of notions. Therefore if the notions themselves (which is the root of the
matter) are confused and overhastily abstracted from the facts, there can be no
firmness in the superstructure. Our only hope therefore lies in a true induction.

XV
There is no soundness in our notions, whether logical or physical. Substance, Quality,
Action, Passion, Essence itself, are not sound notions; much less are Heavy, Light,
Dense, Rare, Moist, Dry, Generation, Corruption, Attraction, Repulsion, Element,
Matter, Form, and the like; but all are fantastical and ill defined.

XVI
Our notions of less general species, as Man, Dog, Dove, and of the immediate
perceptions of the sense, as Hot, Cold, Black, White, do not materially mislead us; yet
even these are sometimes confused by the flux and alteration of matter and the
mixing of one thing with another. All the others which men have hitherto adopted are but wanderings, not being abstracted and formed from things by proper methods.

XVII

Nor is there less of willfulness and wandering in the construction of axioms than in the formation of notions, not excepting even those very principles which are obtained by common induction; but much more in the axioms and lower propositions educed by the syllogism.

XVIII

The discoveries which have hitherto been made in the sciences are such as lie close to vulgar notions, scarcely beneath the surface. In order to penetrate into the inner and further recesses of nature, it is necessary that both notions and axioms be derived from things by a more sure and guarded way, and that a method of intellectual operation be introduced altogether better and more certain.

XIX

There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immovable, proceeds to judgment and to the discovery of middle axioms. And this way is now in fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried.

XX

The understanding left to itself takes the same course (namely, the former) which it takes in accordance with logical order. For the mind longs to spring up to positions of higher generality, that it may find rest there, and so after a little while wearsies of experiment. But this evil is increased by logic, because of the order and solemnity of its disputations.

XXI

The understanding left to itself, in a sober, patient, and grave mind, especially if it be not hindered by received doctrines, tries a little that other way, which is the right one, but with little progress, since the understanding, unless directed and assisted, is a thing unequal, and quite unfit to contend with the obscurity of things.

XXII

Both ways set out from the senses and particulars, and rest in the highest generalities; but the difference between them is infinite. For the one just glances at experiment and particulars in passing, the other dwells duly and orderly among them. The one, again, begins at once by establishing certain abstract and useless generalities, the other rises by gradual steps to that which is prior and better known in the order of nature.¹

Bacon proposes a method of reasoning that “derives axioms from the senses and particulars.” In other words, the only way to search for and discover the truth is through induction. This new logic or organ is needed to replace the syllogistic-deductive logic of Aristotle that does allow us discover anything that is not already in the premises that lead to the conclusion.

However, truth in and of itself is not the final aim of philosophical thinking. The ancient ideal of philosophy as contemplation is discarded in favor of a scientia operativa, a

¹ Bacon, Francis. *Novum Organum*, Book I.
science that seeks to do something with its findings. Hence aphorism number one: “Man, being the servant and interpreter of Nature, can do and understand so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature. Beyond this he neither knows anything nor can do anything.” Man should not only understand nature but do something with this knowledge. Bacon draws a comparison between the spider web of deductive logic and scholastic philosophy and the bee of a true science. The spider gets caught up in its dialectic webs; the bee works arduously collecting things that it will make into honey, a useful product. The analogy is not well-suited to how Bacon understood induction, though a point is made.

Bees go about collecting pollen from flower to flower. The scientist, however, does not just go about collecting experiences and then try to find some general principle in them. He needs to correct experience as he receives it, that is, turn experience into fact. These facts are then analyzed and compared, after which some are discarded in order to arrive at the “middle axioms” and from there to the most general ones. Experiments are also required, although Bacon does not seem to give mathematics or the posing of hypotheses an important place in the formulation of his scientific method. Thus, there is a lot of debate as to whether Bacon is a precursor of the scientific method as we know it today or not. Those who give him credit for laying its foundations point out his emphasis on facts and use of negation, that is, the elimination of dubious experimental data.

Bacon is especially famous for his theory of the idols, a conception of what induces error. Later empiricists would insist the mind is a total blank at birth, a tabula rasa or blank sheet of paper upon which the world impresses images by means of our sensual experience. Bacon sees our mind as collecting but also containing the seeds of error. No science can make any progress unless these seeds or idols are discarded. The four idols are: of the tribe, of the cave, of the marketplace, and of the theater.

The Idols of the Tribe are due to human nature. Our mind is like a distorted mirror that gives a wrong understanding of the world and thus causes us to make false concepts and conceptions. The Idols of the Cave are those beliefs we have no justification for but are unwilling to give up. They arise from our education, our customs, and our unique set of life experiences. The Idols of the Marketplace are based on human discourse. Words name the world and when misused cause misconceptions of it. Finally, the Idols of the Theater are the traditional philosophical systems. Bacon uses the term theater because these systems resemble the fictional world of the theater. The philosophical plays presented on the stage of human history are dogmatic and cannot stand the test of experience. These are the Idols of the human mind that cause error. The Idols of the divine mind are merely “certain empty dogmas.”

Interestingly, Bacon does not have an anti-metaphysical stance; however, his materialism modifies it to the point where many would say it is no longer metaphysics. He divides natural science into physics and metaphysics. Physics studies the mutable and particular causes, while metaphysics studies the immutable and general ones. Bacon calls these causes forms, or the general categories of thought relevant to all of the sciences. They are the end result of the method of induction applied to the material world. These forms are none other than the laws of nature. Bacon’s metaphysics is not teleological; that is, nature has no aim or goal. Finally, metaphysics is no longer philosophia prima, or
first philosophy. That title is reserved to the meta-theory of the sciences that studies how it should be conducted.

Bacon, along with Ockham, is the forerunner of British empiricism. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Moore, and Russell may be seen as following in his footsteps in one way or another. Nevertheless, the old view that induction does not guarantee certainty would remain alive. Many philosophers thought that deduction was the only method possible. René Descartes was one of these thinkers.

René Descartes (1596 – 1650)

The rationalist tradition is continued by the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes. Descartes was a rationalist who makes doubt the starting point of his philosophy. One may even say he was a skeptic in search of certainty. His most famous book, Meditations on the First Philosophy, tries to stake an orderly path that leads the philosopher out of doubt. This is Descartes’ own description of his project.

Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect. When an architect wants to build a house which is stable on ground where there is a sandy topsoil over underlying rock, or clay, or some other firm base, he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand, and anything resting on or mixed in with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil. In the same way, I began by taking everything that was doubtful and throwing it out, like sand; and then, when I noticed that it is impossible to doubt that a doubting or thinking substance exists, I took this as the bedrock on which I could lay the foundations of my philosophy.

Descartes’ foundation is the “thinking substance.” The I of “I think, therefore I exist” is not Descartes’ mind and body but just his mind. In other words, the skeptical doubter cannot doubt that something is doubting, namely her mind. Descartes uses this firm, indubitable belief as the “bedrock” upon which he builds all knowledge. In doing so, he follows the opposite path Bacon does: “Those long chains composed of very simple and easy reasoning, which geometers customarily use to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, had given me occasion to suppose that all the things which can fall

---

2 Descartes, René. Replies 7, AT 7:537.
3 The exact formulation in the Meditations is “I think, I exist is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” The comma should be read as the connector therefore.
under human knowledge are interconnected in the same way.” Hence, knowledge can be achieved only by means of deductive reasoning, not like those who favor induction and “hit upon truth” by chance. True knowledge can be found by discarding what is not “clear and distinct” in the mind (by throwing out all the apples of a barrel we may clearly see which ones are good and which ones are bad) and then deductively inferring other beliefs from them. True knowledge is not only certain. Descartes adds another condition: it must also be indefeasible. True knowledge is “incapable of being destroyed;” that is, there isn’t and never will be an argument that can shake its truth. But how is it possible to go from “my mind exists” to other beliefs that are also certain and indefeasible?

Descartes thinks it is possible because there are innate ideas in the mind that we “come to know” by using the power of our intellect and not through “sensory experience.” These are the good apples in Descartes’ metaphor. In typical rationalist fashion, Descartes uses mathematics and geometry as exemplars of innate ideas. The bad apples are our prima facie (valid at first sight) sensory beliefs. These must be doubted because our senses often trick us and we often think our dreams are real. Moreover, what if there is an evil demon or deceiving god that makes us believe the extensive world is a certain way when it really is quite different? The problem, thus, lies outside our minds.

Descartes is a substance dualist: the world is made up of two substances, mind and body or extensive objects. How, then, do we come to have certain and indefeasible knowledge of extensive objects if we only have such knowledge of our minds? He solves the problem by proving the existence of a non-deceiving God: “in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver.” This move is controversial in at least two ways. Descartes dedicated his book “to the Very Sage and Illustrious the Dean and Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of Theology of Paris.” It was obviously rejected, for Descartes had inverted the order of proof. The other concern is the so-called Cartesian Circle: He starts with clear and distinct premises and infers the conclusion that a non-deceiving God must exist, but then he uses this conclusion as a premise that what is clearly and distinctly conceived is true. In other words, he assumes the clear and distinct rule to prove the clear and distinct rule. Here are two versions of the argument:

Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive to be contained in the idea of something is true of that thing
I clearly and distinctly perceive that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God
Therefore, God exists

I have an idea of supremely perfect being, i.e. a being having all perfections
Necessary existence is a perfection
Therefore, a supremely perfect being exists

Regardless of the validity of these arguments, Descartes then goes on to prove the existence of the external world by using God. His argument is based on the idea that

---

5 Descartes, René. *Meditations* 3 AT 7:36.
sensations are involuntary; that is, we do not will our senses into action. I may open my eyes, uncover my ears, lick or touch something, but the actual processes of seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching occur without my will having anything to do with them. (Think of little children who cover their ears and start humming to avoid listening to something.) Here’s the argument.

Sensations come to me involuntarily
Therefore, sensations are caused by something other than me
Hence, there exists something external to my mind

Many have considered this argument as it stands weak. Why can’t the mind be the source of our ideas about the world? Descartes strengthens his argument by arguing that mind and body are innate concepts. The essences of each of these innate ideas are thinking and extension respectively. He believes that this distinction allows him to say the nothing can be in the mind that a person is not aware of, and since he is not aware his minds wills our sensations, the above argument is made stronger. Descartes brings God back into the picture to prove that the external cause is in fact the material objects that make up the world:

But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature ... For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist.⁶

The external world exists because its cause is not any mental faculty but God, who is not a deceiver and has given man the faculty to know of its existence directly.

So there is no evil demon or deceiving god, but what if life is but a dream? Descartes argues that:

I can almost always make use of more than one sense to investigate the same thing; and in addition, I can use both my memory, which connects present experiences with preceding ones, and my intellect, which has by now examined all the causes of error. Accordingly, I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to ... my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake.⁷

Descartes believes he has at last found the proper foundation for the sciences. There is however one more problem. How do two distinct substances such as mind and body interact? His solution to the problem may seem a bit odd by modern standards. Mind and body are joined together to form a whole. The body is a unity which is indivisible because of the arrangement of its organs. There is a certain part of the body, the pineal gland, that can alter the spirits in the brain, and conversely any change in the spirits alters the

---

⁶ Opus Cit. 6, AT 7:79-80.
⁷ Ibid. 6, AT 7:89.
gland. Descartes dualism suffered from several defects. Baruch Spinoza would try to solve these inconsistencies.

**Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677)**

Spinoza’s philosophy can be divided into his epistemological and metaphysical theories and his views on ethics and politics. His most important books are the *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*. The *Ethics* is a book on epistemology, metaphysics, anthropoplogy, and ethics. The title suggests he took it to be an ethical treatise. In fact, Spinoza thought that his philosophy viewed as a whole was mainly ethical and political.

Spinoza was born into a Portuguese Jewish family in Amsterdam, a beacon of toleration and a center of intellectual fervor in Europe. However, he soon found himself in trouble within his own religious community. Spinoza has been called a philosopher “drunk on God,” an atheist, and a pantheist. The Jews of Amsterdam definitely thought he was an atheist. He was expelled and anathematized in 1656. Here is part of the so-called Curse on Spinoza.

... having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Espinoza... the honorable hakhamim [decides] that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel... By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law... That no one should communicate with him neither in writing nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him.  

The *Ethics* is an attempt at demonstrating metaphysical, epistemological, anthropological, and ethical truths in the manner of Euclidian geometry, that is, by starting with definitions, followed by a finite number of axioms or postulates (without justification since they derive from the definitions), and then an array of theorems that are deductively inferred from the axioms. Spinoza follows this very method in the *Ethics*. Here’s how he proceeds.

---

Definitions

I. By that which is self-caused, I mean that of which the essence involves existence, or that of which the nature is only conceivable as existent.

II. A thing is called finite after its kind, when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature; for instance, a body is called finite because we always conceive another greater body. So, also, a thought is limited by another thought, but a body is not limited by thought, nor a thought by body.

III. By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself; in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.

IV. By attribute, I mean that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance.

V. By mode, I mean the modifications ["Affections"] of substance, or that which exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself.

VI. By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite –that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality. Explanation. –I say absolutely infinite, not infinite after its kind: for, of a thing infinite only after its kind, infinite attributes may be denied; but that which is absolutely infinite, contains in its essence whatever expresses reality, and involves no negation.

VII. That thing is called free, which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and of which the action is determined by itself alone. On the other hand, that thing is necessary, or rather constrained, which is determined by something external to itself to a fixed and definite method of existence or action.

VIII. By eternity, I mean existence itself, insofar as it is conceived necessarily to follow solely from the definition of that which is eternal. Explanation.--Existence of this kind is conceived as an eternal truth, like the essence of a thing, and, therefore, cannot be explained by means of continuance or time, though continuance may be conceived without a beginning or end.

Axioms

I. Everything which exists, exists either in itself or in something else.

II. That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself.

III. From a given definite cause an effect necessarily follows; and, on the other hand, if no definite cause be granted, it is impossible that an effect can follow.

IV. The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause.

V. Things which have nothing in common cannot be understood, the one by means of the other; the conception of one does not involve the conception of the other.
VI. A true idea must correspond with its ideate or object.
VII. If a thing can be conceived as non-existing, its essence does not involve existence.

Spinoza is now ready to formulate his conception of God and his *substance monism*, the belief that there can only be one substance and not two as Descartes had argued.

**Proposition 1:** A substance is prior in nature to its affections.

**Proposition 2:** Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another. (In other words, if two substances differ in nature, then they have nothing in common).

**Proposition 3:** If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other.

**Proposition 4:** Two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes [i.e., the natures or essences] of the substances or by a difference in their affections [i.e., their accidental properties].

**Proposition 5:** In nature, there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.

**Proposition 6:** One substance cannot be produced by another substance.

**Proposition 7:** It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.

**Proposition 8:** Every substance is necessarily infinite.

**Proposition 9:** The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it.

**Proposition 10:** Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.

**Proposition 11:** God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.

**Proposition 12:** No attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided.

**Proposition 13:** A substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible.

**Proposition 14:** Except God, no substance can be or be conceived.

**Proposition 15:** Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.

The basic idea is that if God, or substance, is to be conceived as infinite, there can only be one God or substance that is infinite. Spinoza explains the multiplicity of nature by arguing that among the infinite *attributes* of God we know two: mind and body. These two attributes take on the specific shape of things which Spinoza calls *affectations*. 
Hence, he has solved Descartes dichotomy by not considering them substances. Some of the more interesting theorems that follow are:

Proposition 19: God, and all the attributes of God, are eternal.

Proposition 20: The existence of God and his essence are one and the same.

Proposition 21: All things which follow from the absolute nature of any attribute of God must always exist and be infinite, or, in other words, are eternal and infinite through the said attribute.

Proposition 23: Every mode, which exists both necessarily and as infinite, must necessarily follow either from the absolute nature of some attribute of God, or from an attribute modified by a modification which exists necessarily, and as infinite.

Proposition 24: The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence.

Proposition 28: Every individual thing, or everything which is finite and has a conditioned existence, cannot exist or be conditioned to act, unless it be conditioned for existence and action by a cause other than itself, which also is finite, and has a conditioned existence; and likewise this cause cannot in its turn exist, or be conditioned to act, unless it be conditioned for existence and action by another cause, which also is finite, and has a conditioned existence, and so on to infinity.

Proposition 29: Nothing in the universe is contingent, but all things are conditioned to exist and operate in a particular manner by the necessity of the divine nature.

Proposition 30: Intellect, in function (actu) finite, or in function infinite, must comprehend the attributes of God and the modifications of God, and nothing else.

Proposition 32: Will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary cause.

Proposition 33: Things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in any order different from that which has in fact obtained.

Proposition 36: There is no cause from whose nature some effect does not follow.9

The universe is an orderly system ruled by necessity. (On a side note, Spinoza was Albert Einstein’s favorite philosopher, for he too believed the universe was not a string of chance occurrences, but a whole ruled by necessity. “God does not play with dice,” he said.) Like the Stoics, Spinoza highlights the intellect’s ability to grasp the eternal and infinite nature of God. If we remain at the level of “random experience,” that is, sensory experience, we will never reveal the essences of things. Only reason can grasp an object’s causal connections to God and not just to other objects. In other words, reason captures the reasons why things happen the way they happen, for “it is not in the nature of reason to regard things as contingent, but as necessary.”10 Proposition 32 follows from this Stoic-like view of the cosmos: there is no free will for “it must also be conditioned to exist and act by God, not by virtue of his being substance absolutely infinite, but by

9 Spinoza, Baruch. Ethics, Part I.
10 Ibid. Book II, Prop. 44.
An Introduction to Modern and Modern Philosophy

virtue of his possessing an attribute which expresses the infinite and eternal essence of thought.”  

Spinoza does not believe we can do whatever we want. Human beings have affects which “follow from the same necessity” as everything else.

We have two affects, actions and passions. Spinoza follows the traditional definition of these two terms. When we cause an event to happen, we are acting; when we are acted upon by some external forces, we are passive. In both cases, the result is an increase or decrease in our “power to persevere in being.” All things tend to increase this power or conatus. Since each thing seeks to preserve itself according to its nature by pursuing what is to its advantage, man should pursue what is advantageous to his nature. Man is a thinking being and so his advantage is knowledge. Hence, we should try to free ourselves from our passions, since their cause is external to us, and focus on our mental activity to understand the necessary order of things. This is when we see things sub species eternitatus:

Taking his cue from Maimonides’ view of human eudaimonia, Spinoza argues that the mind’s intellectual love of God is our understanding of the universe, our virtue, our happiness, our well-being and our “salvation”. It is also our freedom and autonomy, as we approach the condition wherein what happens to us follows from our nature (as a determinate and determined mode of one of God’s attributes) alone and not as a result of the ways external things affect us.

The Theological-Political Treatise reminds us of the Socrates in the Apology. Just as Socrates argues that the polis needs gadflies such as himself, Spinoza argues that the state needs to endow its citizens with the freedom to philosophize. There is no danger in philosophical thinking. The theological aspect of this revolutionary text is devoted to untying the bonds between religion and political power. Spinoza does so by means of an exegesis of the passages of the Bible that deal with political power. His conclusion is that the ideal state should be secular, tolerant of the diversity of religions, and democratic. Spinoza offers a version of the social contract already made famous by Thomas Hobbes.

Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1678)

Most people would not disagree with Thomas Hobbes’ assertion that a safe and comfortable existence is the end of social life. But most people living in modern, liberal democracies would be at odds with how he thinks this end is best achieved. In De Cive and the Leviathan, Hobbes presents a view of human nature that makes an absolutely powerful state the only viable political alternative for attaining safety and comfort. Hence, the best way to understand this apparently totalitarian kind of government is to study his views on our nature.

The Leviathan is divided into four parts. It is a very well-written book that follows a very neat and rigorous chain of reasoning. Part I, On Man, presents Hobbes philosophical anthropology with a very heavy dose of biology and psychology. The first five chapters

11 Ibid. Part I, Prop. 32.
12 Nadler, Steven. Opus Cit., p. 65.
present an empiricist view of our senses, perception, memory, thought, language, and reason.

Objects impress themselves on our senses and produce a representation. Perception is defined as “decaying sense,” with memory being just another name for decaying sense. A succession of perceptions is called mental discourse, which may be either guided or unguided. Regulated thought may seek the cause or causes of a perceived effect and is common to “Man and Beast” alike. It may also “seek all the possible events” that any given thing may produce. This kind of regulated thought is proper to man. Language is the means by which we “transfer our mental discourse into verbal.” Names are either proper and singular to one thing or common. Universals are simply names, “there being nothing in the world Universal but names.” Reason is “nothing but reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon, for the marking and signifying of our thoughts.” Furthermore, just as there is error in arithmetic, there is also error in reasoning, which happens when what “we thought likely to follow, follows not, or that which we thought likely to precede it, has not preceded it.”

Hobbes next turns to his theory of human motion, knowledge, and power.

All animals, including man, have two kinds of motions, involuntary or vital, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, excretion, etc., and voluntary, such as speech and the movement of our limbs. Hobbes calls the origin of these voluntary motions endeavor or conatus in Latin. The endeavor towards something is called desire; the endeavor away from something is called aversion. Hobbes equates desire to love and aversion to hate. Hobbes ethics kicks in at this point: anything that is “the object of a man’s desire” is that man’s good; anything he feels aversion for, he calls evil. He then goes on to reduce other terms such delightful/unpleasant, profitable/unprofitable, joy/pain, hope/despair, greed, and ambition to these two original endeavors. Deliberation becomes the process by which we decide between good and evil, the will simply being the act of deciding between one or the other. Happiness is the result of obtaining what I desire and avoiding what we have aversion for.

The end of human discourse is knowledge achieved syllogistically. Knowledge or science is nothing more than the conclusion of a syllogism. Since all knowledge is based on our names for the perceptions we derive from the senses, Hobbes’ syllogism can only achieve “conditional conclusions.”

Hobbes carries out the same method of reduction he applied when dealing with good and evil in his theory of human power. “The power of a man (to take it universally) is his present means to obtain some future apparent good.” Wealth when used liberally is power, reputation is power, good success is power, nobility is power, and eloquence is power. Even worth, dignity, and honor are power, for they are all means we have to obtain what we deem good. Interestingly, science is “small power,” since many people do not consider it valuable. It seems power is a very public notion. In fact, “the greatest of

---

14 *Opus Cit.* Part I, Chapter X.
human powers, is that which is compounded of the powers of most men, united by consent, in one person.” Hobbes’ political theory is based on this last “greatest of human powers.” The reason lies in our human nature:

... we are to consider that the felicity of this life consists not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such finis ultimus (utmost aim) nor summum bonum (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live whose desires are at an end than he whose senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man’s desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire. And therefore the voluntary actions and inclinations of all men tend not only to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life, and differ only in the way, which arise partly from the diversity of passions in diverse men, and partly from the difference of the knowledge or opinion each one has of the causes which produce the effect desired.

So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceases only in death. And the cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to, or that he cannot be content with a moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more. And from hence it is that kings, whose power is greatest, turn their endeavors to the assuring it at home by laws, or abroad by wars: and when that is done, there succeed a new desire; in some, of fame from new conquest; in others, of ease and sensual pleasure; in others, of admiration, or being flattered for excellence in some art or other ability of the mind.

Competition of riches, honor, command, or other power inclines to contention, enmity, and war, because the way of one competitor to the attaining of his desire is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other.\^\[15\]

“Nature has made men so equal,” Hobbes goes on to argue, that that it generates the “hope in the attaining of our ends.” However, “if two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavor to destroy or subdue one another.” Hobbes believes the world cannot materially satisfy all men, and even if it could, not all desires are for material goods. Moreover, the uncertainty of the future makes many men “pursue further than their security requires.” Hobbes is now ready to argue that men need a power so great they would not dare go against it, for “men take no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there is no power able to overwhelm them all.” Without this great power, the nature of man tends towards fighting each other for competition, diffidence, and glory, so that they are in a perpetual war “of every man against every man.” Under these conditions there can be “no industry... culture of the earth... navigation... use of commodities... commodious building... instruments of moving and removing such things that require much force... knowledge... account of time... arts...\^\[15\]

\[^15\] *Opus Cit.* Book I, Chapter XI.
letters… society.” In such conditions, Hobbes famously states, “the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

The above description of the condition of man may strike some as extremely pessimistic, but it is consistent with Hobbes anthropology. Furthermore, it is a description of the natural condition of man; that is, a condition where there is no state to impose its will on people. This is the so-called State of Nature hypothesis. It’s the answer to the hypothetical question of what man must be like prior to any kind of government. However, it is informed by the philosopher’s anthropology, so that different anthropological theories generate different states of nature.

The final problem Hobbes has to solve is how this group of seemingly unruly men comes to form an absolutist government. He does so by arguing that even in the state of nature men have rights. There are, in fact, even laws. Hobbesian man forms a government by contract or agreement.

The right of nature, which writers commonly call jus naturale, is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything which, in his own judgment and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.

By liberty is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments; which impediments may oft take away part of a man's power to do what he would, but cannot hinder him from using the power left him according as his judgment and reason shall dictate to him.

A law of nature, lex naturalis, is a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or take away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinks it may be best preserved. For though they that speak of this subject use to confound jus and lex, right and law, yet they ought to be distinguished, because right consists in liberty to do, or to forbear; whereas law determines and binds to one of them: so that law and right differ as much as obligation and liberty, which in one and the same matter are inconsistent.

And because the condition of man (as has been declared in the precedent chapter) is a condition of war of every one against every one, in which case every one is governed by his own reason, and there is nothing he can make use of that may not be a help unto him in preserving his life against his enemies; it follows that in such a condition every man has a right to every thing, even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endures, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise so ever he be, of living out the time which nature ordinarily allows men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason: that every man ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war. The first branch of which rule contains the first and fundamental law of nature, which is: to seek peace and follow it. The second, the sum of the right of nature, which is: by all means we can to defend ourselves.

16 Ibid. Book I, Chapter XIII.
From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavor peace, is derived this second law: that a man be willing, when others are so too, as far forth as for peace and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself. For as long as every man holds this right, of doing anything he likes; so long are all men in the condition of war. But if other men will not lay down their right, as well as he, then there is no reason for anyone to divest himself of his: for that were to expose himself to prey, which no man is bound to, rather than to dispose himself to peace. This is that law of the gospel: Whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do you to them.

To lay down a man's right to anything is to divest himself of the liberty of hindering another of the benefit of his own right to the same. For he that renounces or passes away his right gives not to any other man a right which he had not before, because there is nothing to which every man had not right by nature, but only stands out of his way that he may enjoy his own original right without hindrance from him, not without hindrance from another. So that the effect which redounds to one man by another man's defect of right is but so much diminution of impediments to the use of his own right original.

Right is laid aside, either by simply renouncing it, or by transferring it to another. By simply renouncing, when he cares not to whom the benefit thereof redounds. By transferring, when he intends the benefit thereof to some certain person or persons. And when a man hath in either manner abandoned or granted away his right, then is he said to be obliged, or bound, not to hinder those to whom such right is granted, or abandoned, from the benefit of it: and that he ought, and it is duty, not to make void that voluntary act of his own: and that such hindrance is injustice, and injury, as being sine jure; the right being before renounced or transferred. So that injury or injustice, in the controversies of the world, is somewhat like to that which in the disputations of scholars is called absurdity. For as it is there called an absurdity to contradict what one maintained in the beginning; so in the world it is called injustice, and injury voluntarily to undo that which from the beginning he had voluntarily done.

Whensoever a man transfers his right, or renounces it, it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself, or for some other good he hopes for thereby. For it is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself. And therefore there be some rights which no man can be understood by any words, or other signs, to have abandoned or transferred. As first a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them that assault him by force to take away his life, because he cannot be understood to aim thereby at any good to himself. The same may be said of wounds, and chains, and imprisonment, both because there is no benefit consequent to such patience, as there is to the patience of suffering another to be wounded or imprisoned, as also because a man cannot tell when he sees men proceed against him by violence whether they intend his death or not. And lastly the motive and end for which this renouncing and transferring of right is introduced is nothing else but the security of a man's person, in his life, and in the means of so preserving life as not to be weary of it.

The mutual transferring of right is that which men call contract.

Hobbes has used the notions of natural right and natural law to explain two things. First, the natural law that dictates peace is used as the rational motivation for wanting to
leave the state of nature. Second, the notion of natural right offers Hobbes the content of that which man must give up in order to achieve a peaceful life. Our right over anything we desire is *transferred* to the ruler and a pact is made. The name given to this pact in philosophy is the *social contract*. In Hobbes philosophy everybody transfers her right to one ruler, and an absolute sovereign is made. The sovereign can do as he pleases. Every decision or rule he makes is as if everyone has agreed to it. Moreover, the ruler is not subject to these laws, since he did not give up any right when everybody else agreed to the pact.

Hobbes political philosophy was vilified at the time. Nonetheless, he thought he was rigorously following a chain of reasoning that starts from an empirically valid conception of man and leads to the absolute state. A good way to conclude differently than he did is to start from different anthropological premises. John Locke did just that.

**John Locke (1632 – 1704)**

Many of our liberal-democratic ideas come from John Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government*, specifically the second one. Some philosophers have noted that Locke’s political theory is essentially a defense of bourgeois political power. Locke did live during a time in European history when the ever more prosperous middle class was gaining political power. Their struggle was against the aristocratic notion that birth determined social status and political power. We now consider this notion unfair. However, most of us would also disagree with the bourgeois notion that economic power should offer political power, which by extension means that those who do not possess wealth have no right to it. Locke did not uphold this equally elitist position: political power proceeds neither from aristocratic birth nor from wealth:

> Section 2 To this purpose, I think it may not be amiss, to set down what I take to be political power; that the power of a magistrate over a subject may be distinguished from that of a father over his children, a master over his servant, a husband over his wife, and a lord over his slave. All which distinct powers happening sometimes together in the same man, if he be considered under these different relations, it may help us to distinguish these powers one from wealth, a father of a family, and a captain of a galley.

> Section 3 Political power, then, I take to be a right of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties, for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community, in the execution of such laws, and in the defense of the commonwealth from foreign injury; and all this only for the public good.\[^{17}\]

Political power is different from the power wealth or being a father assigns to men. It is different in that it may punish by death and use its power of coercion with the force given to it by the community as a whole. It stands to reason that political power is

derived from the community as a whole and not just from a certain group. Locke uses the conception of the state of nature to explain how this is affected.

Section 4 To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.

A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.

Section 6 But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it. The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure.

Section 7 And that all men may be restrained from invading others rights, and from doing hurt to one another, and the law of nature be observed, which wills the peace and preservation of all mankind, the execution of the law of nature is, in that state, put into every man's hands, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of that law to such a degree, as may hinder its violation: for the law of nature would, as all other laws that concern men in this world be in vain, if there were no body that in the state of nature had a power to execute that law, and thereby preserve the innocent and restrain offenders. And if any one in the state of nature may punish another for any evil he has done, every one may do so: for in that state of perfect equality, where naturally there is no superiority or jurisdiction of one over another, what any may do in prosecution of that law, every one must have a right to do.

Section 8 And thus, in the state of nature, one man comes by a power over another; but yet no absolute or arbitrary power, to use a criminal, when he has got him in his hands, according to the passionate heats, or boundless extravagancy of his own will; but only to retribute to him, so far as calm reason and conscience dictate, what is proportionate to his transgression, which is so much as may serve for reparation and restraint: for these two are the only reasons, why one man may lawfully do harm to another, which is that we call punishment. In transgressing the law of nature, the offender declares himself to live by another rule than that of reason and common equity, which is that measure God has set to the actions of men, for their mutual security; and so he becomes dangerous to mankind, the tie, which is to secure them
from injury and violence, being slighted and broken by him... Every man has a right to punish the offender, and be executioner of the law of nature.

Section 15 To those that say, there were never any men in the state of nature, I... moreover affirm, that all men are naturally in that state, and remain so, till by their own consents they make themselves members of some politic society; and I doubt not in the sequel of this discourse, to make it very clear.18

This a very different picture of man’s natural condition than the one depicted by Hobbes. It is by far more rational and moral. However, things can get bad, and in fact do get bad when people do not follow the dictates of reason, but try “to get another man into his absolute power,” without his consent. In this case man is in a state of war:

Section 19 And here we have the plain difference between the state of nature and the state of war, which however some men have confounded, are as far distant, as a state of peace, good will, mutual assistance and preservation, and a state of enmity, malice, violence and mutual destruction, are one from another. Men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them, is properly the state of nature. But force, or a declared design of force, upon the person of another, where there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief, is the state of war... Want of a common judge with authority, puts all men in a state of nature: force without right, upon a man’s person, makes a state of war, both where there is, and is not, a common judge.

Section 21 To avoid this state of war (wherein there is no appeal but to heaven, and wherein every the least difference is apt to end, where there is no authority to decide between the contenders) is one great reason of men’s putting themselves into society, and quitting the state of nature: for where there is an authority, a power on earth, from which relief can be had by appeal, there the continuance of the state of war is excluded, and the controversy is decided by that power.19

Locke is now ready to present his version of the social contract, but before he does that in chapters seven and eight, he dedicates a lengthy chapter on the issue of property. Those who denounce Locke as the champion of liberal-capitalist inequality point out this chapter as a justification for exploitation. Those who favor freedom and the free market, find it an exceptionally coherent explanation of the source and nature of wealth. You be the judge.

Section 27 Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labor of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labor with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labor something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this labor being the unquestionable property of the laborer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.

18 Opus Cit. Chapter 2.
19 Opus Cit. Chapter III.
Section 31 It will perhaps be objected to this, that if gathering the acorns, or other fruits of the earth, &c. makes a right to them, then any one may engross as much as he will. To which I answer, Not so. The same law of nature, that does by this means give us property, does also bound that property too. God has given us all things richly, 1 Tim. VI. 12. is the voice of reason confirmed by inspiration. But how far has he given it us? To enjoy. As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils, so much he may by his labor fix a property in: whatever is beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others. Nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy.

Section 32 But the chief matter of property being now not the fruits of the earth, and the beasts that subsist on it, but the earth itself; as that which takes in and carries with it all the rest; I think it is plain, that property in that too is acquired as the former. As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property. He by his labor does, as it were, enclose it from the common... God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labor.

Section 36 The measure of property nature has well set by the extent of men’s labor and the conveniences of life: no man's labor could subdue, or appropriate all; nor could his enjoyment consume more than a small part; so that it was impossible for any man, this way, to entrench upon the right of another, or acquire to himself a property, to the prejudice of his neighbor, who would still have room for as good, and as large a possession (after the other had taken out his) as before it was appropriated. This measure did confine every man’s possession to a very moderate proportion, and such as he might appropriate to himself, without injury to any body, in the first ages of the world... But be this as it will, which I lay no stress on; this I dare boldly affirm, that the same rule of propriety; that is, that every man should have as much as he could make use of, would hold still in the world, without straightening any body; since there is land enough in the world to suffice double the inhabitants, had not the invention of money, and the tacit agreement of men to put a value on it, introduced (by consent) larger possessions, and a right to them; which, how it has done, I shall by and by show more at large.

Section 37 This is certain, that in the beginning, before the desire of having more than man needed had altered the intrinsic value of things, which depends only on their usefulness to the life of man; or had agreed, that a little piece of yellow metal, which would keep without wasting or decay, should be worth a great piece of flesh, or a whole heap of corn; though men had a right to appropriate, by their labor, each one of himself, as much of the things of nature, as he could use: yet this could not be much, nor to the prejudice of others, where the same plenty was still left to those who would use the same industry. To which let me add, that he who appropriates land to himself by his labor, does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind: for the provisions serving to the support of human life, produced by one acre of enclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compass) ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land of an equal richness lying waste in common. And therefore he that encloses land, and has a greater plenty of the conveniences of life from ten acres, than he could have from an hundred left to nature, may truly be said to give ninety acres to mankind.
Section 40 Nor is it so strange, as perhaps before consideration it may appear, that
the property of labor should be able to over-balance the community of land: for it is
labor indeed that puts the difference of value on every thing; and let any one consider
what the difference is between an acre of land planted with tobacco or sugar, sown
with wheat or barley, and an acre of the same land lying in common, without any
husbandry upon it, and he will find, that the improvement of labor makes the far
greater part of the value.

Section 41 There cannot be a clearer demonstration of any thing, than several nations
of the Americans are of this, who are rich in land, and poor in all the comforts of life;
whom nature having furnished as liberally as any other people, with the materials of
plenty, i.e. a fruitful soil, apt to produce in abundance, what might serve for food,
raiment, and delight; yet for want of improving it by labor, have not one hundredth
part of the conveniences we enjoy.

Section 42 To make this a little clearer, let us but trace some of the ordinary
provisions of life, through their several progresses, before they come to our use, and
see how much they receive of their value from human industry. Bread, wine and cloth,
are things of daily use, and great plenty; yet notwithstanding, acorns, water and
leaves, or skins, must be our bread, drink and clothing, did not labor furnish us with
these more useful commodities: for whatever bread is more worth than acorns, wine
than water, and cloth or silk, than leaves, skins or moss, that is wholly owing to labor
and industry; the one of these being the food and raiment which unassisted nature
furnishes us with; the other, provisions which our industry and pains prepare for us,
which how much they exceed the other in value, when any one has computed, he will
then see how much labor makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy
in this world.

Section 43 An acre of land, that bears here twenty bushels of wheat, and another in
America, which, with the same husbandry, would do the like, are, without doubt, of
the same natural intrinsic value: but yet the benefit mankind receives from the one in
a year, is worth 5l. and from the other possibly not worth a penny, if all the profit an
Indian received from it were to be valued, and sold here; at least, I may truly say, not
one thousandth. It is labor then which puts the greatest part of value upon land,
without which it would scarcely be worth any thing: it is to that we owe the greatest
part of all its useful products; for all that the straw, bran, bread, of that acre of wheat,
is more worth than the product of an acre of as good land, which lies waste, is all the
effect of labor.

Section 44 From all which it is evident, that though the things of nature are given in
common, yet man, by being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and
the actions or labor of it, had still in himself the great foundation of property; and that,
which made up the great part of what he applied to the support or comfort of his
being, when invention and arts had improved the conveniences of life, was perfectly
his own, and did not belong in common to others.

Section 45 Thus labor, in the beginning, gave a right of property, wherever any one
was pleased to employ it upon what was common, which remained a long while the far
greater part, and is yet more than mankind makes use of. Men, at first, for the most
part, contented themselves with what unassisted nature offered to their necessities:
and though afterwards, in some parts of the world, (where the increase of people and
stock, with the use of money, had made land scarce, and so of some value) the
several communities settled the bounds of their distinct territories, and by laws within
themselves regulated the properties of the private men of their society, and so, by compact and agreement, settled the property which labor and industry began.

Section 46 The greatest part of things really useful to the life of man, and such as the necessity of subsisting made the first commoners of the world look after, as it does the Americans now, are generally things of short duration; such as, if they are not consumed by use, will decay and perish of themselves: gold, silver and diamonds, are things that fancy or agreement hath put the value on, more than real use, and the necessary support of life. Now of those good things which nature hath provided in common, every one had a right (as has been said) to as much as he could use, and property in all that he could effect with his labor; all that his industry could extend to, to alter from the state nature had put it in, was his. He that gathered a hundred bushels of acorns or apples, had thereby a property in them, they were his goods as soon as gathered. He was only to look, that he used them before they spoiled, else he took more than his share, and robbed others. And indeed it was a foolish thing, as well as dishonest, to hoard up more than he could make use of. If he gave away a part to any body else, so that it perished not uselessly in his possession, these he also made use of. And if he also bartered away plums, that would have rotted in a week, for nuts that would last good for his eating a whole year, he did no injury; he wasted not the common stock; destroyed no part of the portion of goods that belonged to others, so long as nothing perished uselessly in his hands. Again, if he would give his nuts for a piece of metal, pleased with its color; or exchange his sheep for shells, or wool for a sparkling pebble or a diamond, and keep those by him all his life he invaded not the right of others, he might heap up as much of these durable things as he pleased; the exceeding of the bounds of his just property not lying in the largeness of his possession, but the perishing of any thing uselessly in it.

Section 47 And thus came in the use of money, some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that by mutual consent men would take in exchange for the truly useful, but perishable supports of life.

Section 48 And as different degrees of industry were apt to give men possessions in different proportions, so this invention of money gave them the opportunity to continue and enlarge them... for I ask, what would a man value ten thousand, or an hundred thousand acres of excellent land, ready cultivated, and well stocked too with cattle, in the middle of the inland parts of America, where he had no hopes of commerce with other parts of the world, to draw money to him by the sale of the product? It would not be worth the enclosing, and we should see him give up again to the wild common of nature, whatever was more than would supply the conveniences of life to be had there for him and his family.

Section 49 Thus in the beginning all the world was America, and more so than that is now; for no such thing as money was any where known. Find out something that has the use and value of money amongst his neighbors, you shall see the same man will begin presently to enlarge his possessions.

Section 50 But since gold and silver, being little useful to the life of man in proportion to food, raiment, and carriage, has its value only from the consent of men, whereof labor yet makes, in great part, the measure, it is plain, that men have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth, they having, by a tacit and voluntary consent, found out, a way how a man may fairly possess more land than he himself can use the product of, by receiving in exchange for the surplus gold and
silver, which may be hoarded up without injury to any one; these metals not spoiling
or decaying in the hands of the possessor. This partition of things in an inequality of
private possessions, men have made practicable out of the bounds of society, and
without compact, only by putting a value on gold and silver, and tacitly agreeing in the
use of money: for in governments, the laws regulate the right of property, and the
possession of land is determined by positive constitutions.\footnote{20}

One interpretation of this passage is that money was invented so people could hoard
more goods; another reading suggests money was invented to create more prosperity
among people. In any case, Locke has so far stated two of the roles of government: to
ensure peace and protect property.

Now back to the social contract. Locke believes God created us with an inclination
to live socially. The first form of society is between man and wife and then parents and
children. Still later, society adds the relationship of master and servant. Men soon
discover the benefits of living in political society:

Section 87 Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom, and an
uncontrolled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature, equally
with any other man, or number of men in the world, has by nature a power, not only
to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and
attempts of other men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that law in others,
as he is persuaded the offence deserves, even with death itself, in crimes where the
heinousness of the fact, in his opinion, requires it. But because no political society can
be, nor subsist, without having in itself the power to preserve the property, and in
order thereunto, punish the offences of all those of that society; there, and there only
is political society, where every one of the members has quitted this natural power,
resigned it up into the hands of the community in all cases that exclude him not from
appealing for protection to the law established by it. And thus all private judgment of
every particular member being excluded, the community comes to be umpire, by
settled standing rules, indifferent, and the same to all parties; and by men having
authority from the community, for the execution of those rules, decides all the
differences that may happen between any members of that society concerning any
matter of right; and punishes those offences which any member hath committed
against the society, with such penalties as the law has established: whereby it is easy
to discern, who are, and who are not, in political society together. Those who are
united into one body, and have a common established law and judicature to appeal to,
with authority to decide controversies between them, and punish offenders, are in civil
society one with another: but those who have no such common appeal, I mean on
earth, are still in the state of nature, each being, where there is no other, judge for
himself, and executioner; which is, as I have before showed it, the perfect state of
nature.\footnote{21}

Men agree to a compact or contract by which they form a civil society:

Section 89 Wherever therefore any number of men is so united into one society, as to
quit every one his executive power of the law of nature, and to resign it to the public,
there and there only is a political, or civil society. And this is done, wherever any

\footnote{20}{\textit{Opus Cit.}, Chapter V.}
\footnote{21}{\textit{Opus Cit.}, Chapter VII.}
number of men, in the state of nature, enter into society to make one people, one body politic, under one supreme government; or else when any one joins himself to, and incorporates with any government already made: for hereby he authorizes the society, or which is all one, the legislative thereof, to make laws for him, as the public good of the society shall require; to the execution whereof, his own assistance (as to his own decrees) is due. And this puts men out of a state of nature into that of a commonwealth, by setting up a judge on earth, with authority to determine all the controversies, and redress the injuries that may happen to any member of the commonwealth; which judge is the legislative, or magistrates appointed by it. And wherever there are any number of men, however associated, that have no such decisive power to appeal to, there they are still in the state of nature.

However, it is not Hobbes’ idea of an absolute monarchy:

Section 90 Hence it is evident, that absolute monarchy, which by some men is counted the only government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all: for the end of civil society, being to avoid, and remedy those inconveniences of the state of nature, which necessarily follow from every man’s being judge in his own case, by setting up a known authority, to which every one of that society may appeal upon any injury received, or controversy that may arise, and which every one of the society ought to obey; wherever any persons are, who have not such an authority to appeal to, for the decision of any difference between them, there those persons are still in the state of nature; and so is every absolute prince, in respect of those who are under his dominion.

But rather a polity of free and equal men who retain certain rights:

Section 95 Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it. This any number of men may do, because it injures not the freedom of the rest; they are left as they were in the liberty of the state of nature. When any number of men has so consented to make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic, wherein the majority has a right to act and conclude the rest.

Section 96 For when any number of men have, by the consent of every individual, made a community, they have thereby made that community one body, with a power to act as one body, which is only by the will and determination of the majority: for that which acts any community, being only the consent of the individuals of it, and it being necessary to that which is one body to move one way; it is necessary the body should move that way whither the greater force carries it, which is the consent of the majorit: or else it is impossible it should act or continue one body, one community, which the consent of every individual that united into it, agreed that it should; and so every one is bound by that consent to be concluded by the majority. And therefore we see, that in assemblies, empowered to act by positive laws, where no number is set by that positive law which empowers them, the act of the majority passes for the act of the whole, and of course determines, as having, by the law of nature and reason, the power of the whole.
Section 97 And thus every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation, to every one of that society, to submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it; or else this original compact, whereby he with others incorporates into one society, would signify nothing, and be no compact, if he be left free, and under no other ties than he was in before in the state of nature.  

The most important right a government must protect is the holding property: “The great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property. To which in the state of nature there are many things wanting.” Locke then places strict limits on the legislative power of government.

To begin, “it is not, nor can possibly be absolutely arbitrary over the lives and fortunes of the people: for it being but the joint power of every member of the society given up to that person, or assembly, which is legislator.” It may not overstep its powers by assuming “a power to rule by extemporary arbitrary decrees, but is bound to dispense justice, and decide the rights of the subject by promulgated standing laws.” It cannot “take from any man any part of his property without his own consent.” And finally, “the legislative cannot transfer the power of making laws to any other hands.”

In the final chapter of the Second Treatise Locke justifies a change of government. The idea of rebellion was not one most people could accept in Locke’s time. Rebellion was usually equated with going against the will of God, for most kings still held on to the divine right of kings theory. Locke knows this very well: “But it will be said, this hypothesis lays a ferment for frequent rebellion.” His main argument is that the “end of government is the good of mankind; and which is best for mankind.” He then asks why “the people should be always exposed to the boundless will of tyranny?” Why shouldn’t rulers “be sometimes liable to be opposed, when they grow exorbitant in the use of their power, and employ it for the destruction, and not the preservation of the properties of their people?”

Locke’s theory is a powerful alternative to Hobbes’. His insistence on majority rule and the rule of law informs most constitutions in the western world today. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that we currently live in Lockean societies. His version of liberalism matches quite well with the prevalent economic theory of our time, capitalism.

John Locke has also gone down in the history of philosophy as one of its main empiricists. Here’s a brief look at his principal ideas.

All the objects of human understanding are ideas. By ideas, Locke means both our perceptions and conceptions. All of these ideas come from experience, since at birth the

---

22 Opus Cit., Chapter VIII.
23 Opus Cit., Chapter IX, section 124.
24 Ibid., Chapter XI, sections 135 – 142.
25 Ibid., Chapter XIX, sections 224, 229.
mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate; there are no innate ideas. Unlike Descartes, for instance, he does not try to determine whether mind and matter exist or not. They do and so do our ideas about them: “everyone is conscious of them in himself, and men's words and actions will satisfy him that they are in others.” His chief concern is how our ideas got into our mind. They do through experience. The mind perceives and combines them using the internal operations of the mind, or “internal sense.”

There are two kinds of ideas, simple and complex. Sensation provides the mind or understanding with material that enters “the senses simple and unmixed.” The mind then mixes them to form the ideas used for knowledge. Ideas such as substance and essence are all the result of this combination of simple ideas, as are universals. His empiricism is rather simple in many ways since he does not deal with the problem of cause and effect, for instance; nevertheless, that very fact inspired many of his readers to formulate new questions.

Locke goes on to posit two types of qualities, primary and secondary. Color, smell, taste, and sounds are secondary; “solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number” primary. They differ because primary qualities “do really exist in the bodies themselves,” while secondary qualities do not resemble anything in the body itself.

Locke defines knowledge as “the perception of the connection of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy, in any of our ideas.” There are two kinds, intuitive and demonstrative. In intuition we immediately perceive agreement or disagreement. Demonstration is a mediated form of intuition where each step of the process is made up of intuitions. Ethics and mathematics are demonstrable: “general and certain truths are only founded in the habitues and relations of abstract ideas.” Math and ethics are not as troublesome as matters of real existence, since they are merely relations of ideas. In terms of things that really exist, only two are possible: the self by intuition and God by demonstration. Finally, Locke holds that there is a third kind of “knowledge” that does not really deserve the name, apprehension of the external world (other than the self and God, of course). This kind of knowledge is faith or opinion. In other words, we can only be certain of ourselves, God, and the ideas present in our minds. Whether objects actually exist is a matter of opinion:

The certainty of things existing *in rerum natura* when we have the testimony of our senses for it is not only as great as our frame can attain to, but as our condition needs. For, our faculties being suited no to the full extent of being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple; but to the preservation of us, in whom they are; and accommodated to the use of life: they serve to our purpose well enough, if they will but give us certain notice of those things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us.28 (Bk. 4:2:14)

Accordingly, Locke notes that Bacon’s science is impossible, since strictly speaking there is “no science of bodies.” Locke’s philosophy is inconsistent in many ways, yet his

musings on knowledge left so many problems unsolved that they pointed the way for two other empiricists, namely George Berkeley and David Hume.

**George Berkeley (1685 – 1753)**

Berkeley’s philosophy in a nutshell is contained in his famous dictum *being is being perceived*; that is, only mental objects exist, or more specifically, mental substances. What we generally hold to be material objects are really ideas. Thus, Berkeley is both an immaterialist and an idealist: “all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known.”

The *Principles of Human Knowledge* begins by following Locke’s basic account of ideas, but then goes a step further. It is “a manifest contradiction” to believe “that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a world all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from being perceived.” It is a contradiction because saying something has existence beyond our perception of it is to say we “know” something that is unknown to our perception of it.

Objects, then, are a collection of ideas. Against Locke who said primary qualities resemble the actual object, Berkeley argues that an idea can only be compared with another idea. Against Aristotle, he argues that there is no idea of substance since it is impossible to provide any evidence for this entity. The most one can do is generate an obscure idea of it. Moreover, substance is not necessary in order to put forth a theory of mental activity. To all this, Berkeley adds his so-called Master Argument: “It is but looking into your own thoughts, and so trying whether you can conceive it possible for a sound, or figure, or motion, or color, to exist without the mind, or unperceived. This easy trial may make you see, that what you contend for, is a downright contradiction.” The challenge is to conceive of an object independently of a perceiving mind.

Now, Berkeley admits that we cause some of our ideas, but there are those we do not will, such as when you open your eyes “in broad daylight.” These impressions, he thinks, are produced by “some other spirit,” namely God. Berkeley conceives of God as a thinking spirit or mind. Berkeley now makes a distinction between ideas of the imagination, that is, ideas we can will, and ideas of sense, which are “more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are.” If you were to ask Berkeley what being is, his answer would be his famous dictum supplemented by this distinction. Reality is the collection of ideas of sense. Furthermore, the ideas of sense are predictable, regular, and coherent because they follow the laws of nature as established by the divine mind, God.

---

David Hume (1711 – 1776)

This Scottish philosopher pushed British empiricism to its logical limits, much as Spinoza did with rationalism. Hume wrote two major books on human knowledge, the *Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. He also wrote on ethics (*Dissertation on the Passions*) and on religion (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*), among other topics. During Hume’s life the Enlightenment was in full swing. His philosophy covers most of the important topics being discussed at the time: science, knowledge, causality, morality, God, etc. Let’s begin with his epistemology as expressed in the *Enquiry*, a collection of twelve connected essays.

Hume starts out by distinguishing between two styles of philosophical writing, an easy to read and a difficult to read style. The *Enquiry* is written in both styles according to the topic at hand. Section two begins by mapping the mental geography of the human mind.

All our ideas derive from impressions experience imprints on our mind through our senses. The difference between an idea and an impression is that the latter is livelier. There are two kinds of ideas, simple and compound (made up of simple ones). Hume also sets a standard for any philosophical idea, namely that it must derive from an impression: when “a philosophical term is employed without any meaning ... we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived?” The simple ideas derived from our impressions can be compounded by a process of association ruled by resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. The objects of the understanding, or human reason, are either relations of ideas or matters of fact:

Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides, is a proposition which expresses a relation between these figures. That three times five is equal to the half of thirty, expresses a relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would for ever retain their certainty and evidence.

Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. "That the sun will not rise tomorrow" is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, "that it will rise". We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind.32

---

Due to the nature of matters of fact, Hume deems it “a subject worthy of curiosity to enquire what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory.” Hume believes that “All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of ‘Cause and Effect.’ By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses.” He offers a first example: “If you were to ask a man, why he believes any matter of fact, which is absent; for instance, that his friend is in the country, or in France; he would give you a reason; and this reason would be some other fact as a letter received from him, or the knowledge of his former resolutions and promises.” Here is the second one: “A man, finding a watch or any other machine in a desert island, would conclude that there had once been men in that island. All our reasonings concerning fact are of the same nature. And here it is constantly supposed that there is a connection between the present fact and that which is inferred from it.” Thus, the real question is “how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect.”

Hume rules out that our knowledge of cause and effect is *a priori*. Hume argues that “the effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it.” He offers two examples to support his view:

Motion in the second billiard ball is a quite distinct event from motion in the first; nor is there anything in the one to suggest the smallest hint of the other. A stone or piece of metal raised into the air, and left without any support, immediately falls: but to consider the matter *a priori*, is there anything we discover in this situation which can beget the idea of a downward, rather than an upward, or any other motion, in the stone or metal? ^33

He concludes that any causal connection between events that is not based on experience is arbitrary, for when I see “a billiard ball moving in a straight line towards another; even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me, as the result of their contact or impulse… may we not conceive that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction?” ^34

Hume introduces the notion of habit as a way of explaining how the human mind makes generalizations based on experience. Custom or habit is an inductive process of the mind based on a limited but significant number of experiences. Habit makes our ideas more “intense and steady.” The principles of association can make an idea more intense and steady, thus acquiring the status of belief.

For centuries philosophers and scientists knew that induction can at best generate a probable conclusion. Hume’s epistemology leads him to posit probable knowledge as the best kind of knowledge we can aspire to. Hume admits there are events that have yet to generate a different effect, such as that fire burns or that immersion in water causes drowning. Yet, the best experience can say is that these are highly probable events. Our

---

^33* Loc. Cit. 22.*  
^34* Loc. Cit. 23 – 25.*
view of the world must remain contingent. Hume can now argue that the “idea of necessary connexion” is based on “customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual [i.e., constantly conjoined] attendant.”

One of the most interesting conclusions Hume draws from his epistemology is the denial of the self. Hume is not saying we do not exist; his point is that we have no unchanging nature. We are simply the sum of a series of sensations or experiences. This idea has flourished of late in western philosophy.

In sections ten, Hume denies the existence of miracles, since they go against probability. He argues that religions are better founded on faith and not miracles. In the case of Christianity, it needs miracles, but belief in them should be an article of faith. Section eleven is a dialogue in which one of the interlocutors, a skeptic, attacks the design argument for the existence of God, as well as the notion that God rewards or punishes our actions in this life or in an afterlife.

The *Enquiry* concludes with a discussion on skepticism. Hume thinks Pyrrho’s skepticism is too overarching and must be rejected since “no durable good can ever result from it.” He recommends a form of moderate Academic skepticism, such that we exercise a healthy degree of caution in our reasoning. The *Enquiry* appropriately ends with some words of caution:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.\(^{36}\)

Now on to Hume’s moral theory which was equally controversial and equally influential well after his death.

In section eight Hume had defined liberty as “a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will.” Hume draws upon earlier moral theorists to draw the distinction between moral agent, receiver, and spectator. Moral agents are motivated by virtues which are either instinctive (e.g. benevolence) or acquired (e.g. justice, because it is useful). All actions done or received fall under four categories of virtue: 1) what is useful to us, 2) what is useful to others, 3) what is agreeable to us, and 4) what is agreeable to others.

As an agent, actions will have an effect on a receiver. For example, if an agent gives food to a starving person, then the receiver will experience an immediately agreeable feeling from such an act. Also, the receiver may see the usefulness of your food donation, insofar as eating food will improve his health. When considering the usefulness of your food donation, the receiver will receive another agreeable feeling from your act. Finally, a spectator observes these agreeable feelings that the receiver experiences.

\(^{35}\) *Opus cit*, section VII, 59.

\(^{36}\) *Ibid*, section XII, 132.
The spectator will sympathetically experience agreeable feelings along with the receiver. These sympathetic feelings of pleasure *constitute* my moral approval of the original act of charity that the agent performed. By sympathetically experiencing this pleasure, the spectator thereby pronounces the character trait to be a virtue, as opposed to a vice. Suppose, on the other hand, that an agent did something to hurt the receiver, such as steal his car. The spectator would then sympathetically experience the receiver's pain and thereby pronounce the character trait to be a vice, as opposed to a virtue. The moral spectator is the impartial observer who passes judgment on other people's moral actions. Hume argues that the spectator's approval is not a matter of rational judgment but one based on emotion. Hence, Hume is generally classified as an emotivist; that is, a moral theorist who grounds morality on human sentiments, to use the term commonly employed in Hume's time. As he put it, "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions."

Finally, one of Hume's most influential insights is that an *ought* cannot be derived from an *is*. In other words, a normative statement cannot be inferred from the description of a state of affairs. Hume's influence on morality extends to the Utilitarians, a school of thought that reduces morality to an action's utility. His moral theory is also one of first completely secular theories of the Modern Age.

Hume's philosophy presents many challenges. His epistemology denies the existence of the law of cause and effect and of the self. His moral theory challenges rationalist conceptions to show just how reason is the motive of our actions. Immanuel Kant would take up all these challenges, but before we take up Kant, let's take a closer look at the Enlightenment.

*The Enlightenment*

The origins of the Enlightenment can be decisively traced back to the English scientist Isaac Newton. His physics not only explained the operations of the universe but was so fertile it generated a great number of problems in philosophy. The other great mind of the 16th century, René Descartes, had a similar influence; however, Newton's *opus maximus*, the *Principia Mathematica* of 1687 had an even more powerful effect on European thought. This couplet by Alexander Pope gives an idea of how strong his influence was.

```
Nature and Nature's law lay hid in night;
God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light.
```

Newton's contribution was both substantive and methodological. Most high school students know about Newton's laws, the three laws of motion: inertia, action and reaction, and acceleration proportional to force, as well as the universal law of
gravitation. This last law solved a problem that had perplexed modern scientists—the problem of action at a distance. In other words, how do objects reach across space to affect other objects? Newton reasoned that the force of gravity acting between an object A and an object B is directly proportional to the mass of object A, directly proportional to the mass of object B, and inversely proportional to the square of the distance which separates the centers of both objects. His solution, though, posed some new problems that the mathematics of Newton’s time could not solve. In order to solve these problems, he invented integral calculus! Newton’s physics was widely accepted because it could be experimentally and mathematically proven. Newton’s methodological principles had an equally important effect.

In the third edition of the *Principia*, Newton formulates four principles that should guide scientific investigation. Briefly, they are 1) we are to admit no more causes of natural things such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances, 2) the same natural effects must be assigned to the same causes, 3) qualities of bodies are to be esteemed as universal, and 4) propositions deduced from observation of phenomena should be viewed as accurate until other phenomena contradict them. Newton defines his method, the scientific method as follows.

As in mathematics, so in natural philosophy the investigation of difficult things by the method of analysis ought ever to precede the method of composition. This analysis consists of making experiments and observations, and in drawing general conclusions from them by induction...by this way of analysis we may proceed from compounds to ingredients, and from motions to the forces producing them; and in general from effects to their causes, and from particular causes to more general ones till the argument end in the most general. This is the method of analysis: and the synthesis consists in assuming the causes discovered and established as principles, and by them explaining the phenomena preceding from them, and proving the explanations.

Newton’s physics was both elegant and simple. A few mathematically expressed laws could explain and predict a large number of natural phenomena that could be directly observed in nature or under experimentation. Newton’s universe is a precise mechanism that follows rigorous laws which may be expressed in equally rigorous mathematical terms. The universe became less obscure, as Pope would say, yet Newton’s theories, though they would dominate physics for the next three hundred years, did not go unchallenged, particularly his notions of absolute space, time, and motion.

Newton’s view was that relative change in space and time required the existence of absolute space and time distinct from the bodies that moved over it or the time that elapsed between these movements. In other words, the “space” or mass of a body is not the same as the absolute, immobile space in which it is located. When we measure relative motion, we do so relative to other bodies; when we measure relative time, we do so relative to these bodily motions. However, Newton believed these measurements could not be done without the existence of absolute space and time.

---

One of the most interesting stages for the debate between Newton’s theories of absolute space and time and the so-called relationists (those who believe that the location of an object is not a property of an independent space, but a property of the located object itself relative to, or in relation to, other objects) was the correspondence held between Samuel Clarke and the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. For a period of almost two years, Clarke (with Newton’s help, it is believed) and Leibniz discussed not only the nature of space and time, but also God’s role in the universe and the possibility of miracles. Newton’s physics had a place for God as the creator of the universe and its laws; however, the very nature of this universe left very little room for a theist God. This in turn led to questions on morality and the status of political power. It is easy to see how Newton’s physics had such an enormous impact on vast portions of European thought.

The Enlightenment for the most part sided with Newton. The characterization of the Age of Reason includes terms that can be traced back to and derived from Newton’s mechanistic view of the universe. The most basic belief of the Enlightenment, one that some people still share to this day, is that the whole of nature, including man and his social relations, can be explained in terms of absolute laws of nature. Since these laws existed and had been discovered by human reason, progress was inevitable if we always allowed human reason to guide us. A view such as this led many to attack superstitions, social customs, morality, political and economic relations, and ultimately religion, since so much was based on religious interpretation. Enlightenment thinkers were divided into theists, deists, agnostics, and atheists. Theist continued to uphold the traditional view of a God who not only created the world but acted upon it according to his will. Deists sided with an impersonal God who did not interfere in the world. He didn’t need to: he had given man the ability to think and discover for himself the laws that govern everything in the universe. Agnostics simply believed we could not know whether there is or there isn’t a God. Atheists believed they did have enough knowledge to deny the existence of any God.

Some of the most important Enlightenment thinkers were the French philosophes, a group of social critics who were not so much interested in academic debate as much as in social reform. Among them were Diderot and D’Alembert, the editors of the Encyclopedia, and Voltaire. In England, David Hume and Adam Smith wrote on philosophy and economics. There was, however, a philosopher whose ideas went against the very grain of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The brunt of his argument denied the belief that man had been steadily progressing as civilization became more rational.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Rousseau was born in the conservative, Calvinist republic of Geneva, the antithesis of the tolerant Amsterdam. His life changed in 1749 when he saw a newspaper advertising an essay competition by the Academy of Dijon in France. The essay had to answer the question, “Has the rebirth of the sciences and arts contributed to the improvement or
corruption of manners?” Rousseau’s answer, in direct opposition to the spirit of progress of the times, was a resounding no.

Civilization, he argues in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, has been a continuous corruption of what is good in man. Instead of a steady progress, civilization meant a steady decay of man’s natural goodness. The *First Discourse*, as his essay is also known, describes modern man as a wearer of masks he uses to hide his real thoughts and feelings. Modern man has alienated himself from his true, good nature. Rousseau thinks he can find support for his argument in history, although his historical talents are rather suspect. Most of his contemporaries rejected his thesis, but Rousseau was now famous. A second essay would increase his fame.

The Academy of Dijon held a new contest in 1754. This time the question was “What is the origin of inequality among men and is it authorized by natural law?” The *Discourse on Inequality*, or Second Discourse, continues the assumption of his first essay, namely that natural man was good. However, Rousseau adds a new idea which explains why there are so many types of cultures in the world today. There is no one human nature but human natures. Man is a malleable being who adapts himself to different circumstance. This doesn’t keep Rousseau from putting forth his own State of nature theory. He begins by saying we may never truly know how men really were in this state: “It is no light enterprise to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in the actual nature of man and to know well a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed and will probably never exist.” In other words, the description of the state of nature is purely hypothetical.

In order to give his rather nonfactual account some verisimilitude, Rousseau, as Locke before him, uses primitive peoples as examples of man in a state of nature. His “noble savage” is a solitary being without friends or property of any kind. Ruled by “self-love” and “pity,” he seeks to preserve himself in an environment of self-sufficiency and lack of competition. He lived a happier life than ours. Rousseau believes the origin of our inequality lies in the invention of property. As he famously puts it: “The first man that who enclosed a piece of ground and said, ’This is mine’ and found others so simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civilized society.” The legitimization and sanctifying of property rights is the source of all our discontents. It created social inequalities. If you are wondering about the second half of the question, Rousseau ignores it.

The French *philosophes* reacted negatively to the Second Discourse. Voltaire wrote a sarcastic letter to Rousseau where he states: “Sir, I have received your new book, written against the human race, and I thank you… Never was so much intelligence used to make us stupid. While reading it, one longs to go on all fours.” Rousseau would go on publishing, though. His next book, *Émile*, is as paradoxical as his two essays.

*Émile* is a book on education which tries to show how children, who have no original perversity, should be educated, or rather denaturalized. The paradox lies in this very goal, since Rousseau believes that “Everything is good when it springs from the hand of the Creator; everything degenerates when shaped by the hand of man.” The naturally good child, reminiscent of Rousseau’s natural man, cannot remain in his “innocent” state;
he must become an active and virtuous member of society. The child’s natural feeling of pity has to become an imaginative empathy for others. To add to the paradox, Rousseau asserts that being truly moral is natural and involves listening to our conscience in “the silence of the passions.” In other words, morality is a matter of overcoming our passions in a sort of inner struggle. Another interesting theory in the *Émile* is the role of women. Girls are to receive the same sort of education as boys, minus the academics, since “woman is made to please man” and she is incapable of complex thought. This conception made Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of Frankenstein, so angry she wrote *The Rights of Women* in reply.

Rousseau’s life would change after the publication of the *Émile*, not because of its pedagogical theories, but due to the religious ideas expressed towards the end. The main character, Émile, is given religious training by a priest, the Vicar of Savoyard, who tells him that God is the Being that moves and orders the universe. He goes on to say that we are all created good and equipped with a conscience, “the immortal and celestial voice” that will help guide us. Naturally, some people do not listen to their conscience and do evil. The Vicar then tells Émile that each man must find his way to God, and that organized religion does more harm than good. Rousseau would spend the rest of his life running away from the persecution of organized religions who viewed his “natural religion” as dangerous.

Rousseau’s next book, the *Social Contract*, is perhaps his most famous one. He was aware that civilization with all its depravity and inequality was here to stay. The *Social Contract* is a conception of civil society that tries to temper the negative aspects of living in it. The book calls for a complete reform of political society. In the spirit of the Contractual tradition, Rousseau sets out to explain why someone would give up his natural rights, particularly his freedom: “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains. How did this change occur? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I believe I can answer this question.”

Rousseau defines the state as a voluntary association. When people act as people, that is, privately, they obey their own will. When people act as citizens—when they vote in a general assembly to give themselves laws and become subject to them—they obey the will of all. Hence, political freedom is synonymous to obedience to the will of all. Rousseau’s calls this organic collection of wills the “General Will.” It is both the core of his political-moral philosophy and its greatest point of contention.

The General Will is reminiscent of the Greek *Demos*, the collection of citizens who could partake in the direction of the *polis*. (One only has to remember Socrates argument in *Crito* against escaping from prison to understand what Rousseau has in mind.) Rousseau believes every single person in society must participate in society, to the point where, if necessary, they must be “forced to be free.” This is a chilling phrase for anyone familiar with the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century; however, Rousseau is optimistic that a good education can make people love the General will “with that exquisite sentiment which every man living in isolation has only for himself.” A good education also guarantees that future legislators will vote according to a conception of

---

the common good and not in self-interest, making obedience to the laws of the General Will is as unavoidable as obedience to the law of gravity. This move is reminiscent of Plato’s utopian republic. The term general will was in vogue in French intellectual circles during the Enlightenment. Rousseau gives it a unique meaning to the point where it becomes almost an abstract entity. His General Will is not a simple collection of bodies or wills that convene; it has a life of its own in a very metaphysical sense and is the sole source of sovereignty.

Rousseau makes an important distinction between sovereignty and government, one that Hobbes’, for instance, did not make. Sovereignty lies in the assembly of citizens that meet regularly to pass laws. Government is simply a body of officials that administer the law. In other words, sovereignty lies in the legislature and not in the executive or judiciary. Government is something like a hired hand that carries out the dictates of the legislature. Interestingly, Rousseau thinks the aristocracy is best suited to carry out this chore, since they have plenty of free time and independent incomes that would avoid them from becoming corrupt. Speaking of aristocracy, Rousseau thinks material inequalities are inevitable, yet no citizen should be rich enough to buy another man’s conscience or so poor as to have to sell it.

Finally, Rousseau believes citizens are to be taught a civil religion similar to deism. Belief in an afterlife is convenient since it makes any act against the state illegal as well as sinful. Orthodox Christianity, though, is undesirable, since it places too much importance on an afterlife and not on good citizenship. Rousseau cannot admit any division of loyalties. Religious fanatics demand total obedience to their religion and not to the state: “true Christians are made into slaves.”

The General Will has had many modern critics. It is based on a notion that goes against the grain of modern individualistic thought, namely, that the individual derives his sense of identity entirely from the collective. It also fails to take into consideration any sort of minority group, since the law always reflects the absolute power of all the citizens and not just the majority. Anybody who fails to take part of or abide by the General Will is considered anti-social. Furthermore, the General Will needs no written guarantees against its possible abuse of power, because this sovereign body would never harm its members.

Rousseau’s *Social Contract* was not widely read during his lifetime; however, the French Revolution made it immediately popular. It became a kind of revolutionary bible, much like Marx’s *Capital* would be for twentieth century communist revolutionaries around the world. The Jacobin Reign of Terror was based on Robespierre’s interpretation of its ideas, especially the notion of forcing people to be free. Rousseau’s moral and political thought had an enormous influence over Immanuel Kant.
Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)

Immanuel Kant was unique in more ways than one. Though he is generally regarded as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, philosophical minds in the Western tradition, no one would have guessed it, since he wrote his main books well after he was forty; most great philosophers write their main works before they are forty. Another rarity for a philosopher of his stature and vastness of mind was the fact he never left his home town of Königsberg in East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia). Kant is also the first great modern philosopher to teach at a university, restarting a trend that has lasted until today. However, what makes Kant so peculiar is his two apparently contradictory allegiances, namely, his intense Lutheran Pietism and Enlightenment rationalism. This last circumstance, though, might well be why his philosophical thought is so fertile.

Most of Kant’s philosophy is contained in three books: the Critique of Pure Reason, the Critique of Practical Reason, and the Critique of Judgment. Kant also published two books that are shorter versions of the first two Critiques, Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics That Will be Able to Come Forward as Science and Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, among others. It is easy to see what Kant’s main concern was from the titles of these last two books. In 1776 he writes: “I have had the fate to be in love with metaphysics.”

At the time Kant went to the university German philosophy was dominated by Leibniz’s metaphysics as interpreted by Christian Wolff. Leibniz was the third great rationalist of the 16th century, along with Descartes and Spinoza. In his view, the universe is made up of an infinite set of substances in which a life force is present. He calls these substances monads. Monads may seem like atoms, a simile Leibniz himself makes, but are much more metaphysical than physical. Nature is made up of monads, but “bodies act as if there were no souls... and souls act as if there were no bodies, and both act as if each influenced each other.” Moreover, monads have “no windows:” nothing can come into them and nothing can depart. Each one changes according to “an internal principle” which includes perception and memory. Nature operates because the monads are programmed by God in a “pre-established harmony.” Leibniz proposes two level of reality, the metaphysical level of the monads where there is no space, no time, or no causality in the physical sense, and the phenomenal where causation occurs in space and time. The physical level, though, is based on the metaphysical. Physics, though an illusion, can be a correct description of the phenomenal world. Wolff tries to combine Leibniz’ philosophy with Newton’s physics. He believes in true rationalist fashion that “philosophy must possess complete certitude... For since philosophy is a science, its content must be demonstrated by inferring conclusions with legitimate sequence from certain and immutable principles.” This sort of reasoning was increasingly being attacked as dogmatic rationalism by scientists and empiricist philosophers alike. Kant credits David Hume for awakening him from his “dogmatic slumbers.” Hume had not only discredited rationalism but also the very foundations of science. Kant realized that a new metaphysics was needed. He sets out to do so in the Critiques.

---

Kant's *Critical philosophy* examines the soul and three of its faculties. Aristotle had been the first philosopher to analyze the soul in terms of faculties. He argues that there are three levels of soul, the nutritive, the sensitive, and the rational. The faculties of these souls are divided into two powers: the power to achieve an aim and the power to change. Kant proposes three faculties of the soul, knowledge, moral desire, and feeling. Each of these faculties corresponds to a *Critique*. Each of the *Critiques* explores the ability to make judgments in each faculty. Thus, the *Critique of Pure Reason* examines judgments of knowledge; the *Critique of Practical Reason* examines moral judgments; and the *Critique of Judgment* examines judgments as expressed through feelings of pleasure and displeasure.

Each of the three faculties is developed through a set of cognitive faculties, three active and one receptive. The active cognitive faculties are imagination, understanding, and reason. Kant calls the receptive faculty sensible intuition. These faculties allow Kant to overcome the metaphysical dichotomies of presence-absence and subject-object, since he does not assume the existence of a transcendental object (God, for instance) or empirical object (nature) as the foundation and end of philosophy. The positing of a transcendental object had always mired metaphysics in the problem of absence and presence of this real object; the positing of an empirical object generates the subject-object dichotomy. Kant replaces the notion of a subject either in control of an empirical object or dependent on a transcendental one with “the question of the functioning of consciousness and feeling.” Let’s see how this process works.

Kant defines imagination as “the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present.” It intuits the phenomenal data which it then presents to the understanding, making reflexivity possible. The understanding classifies and orders this data; however, it is not a process of comprehension but of representation. Hence, neither imagination nor understanding is capable of thinking to or for itself. Reason, as the “faculty of principles,” contains three *a priori* ideas: the soul, the cosmos, and God which are used by the understanding to regulate, organize and comprehend the information provided by the faculty of imagination. These three ideas are operative since they allow the other two faculties to carry out their processes, but they are also “unconditioned,” or unrepresentable.

The main problem of philosophy for Kant is the question of representation; that is, “What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call ‘representation’ to the object?” This object is not metaphysical, since Kant rejects the absence-presence dichotomy. Hence, representation “has nothing to represent.” It is in fact pure absence. Nevertheless, because absence cannot be categorized and cannot be compared with presence, it must also be irreducible. Thus, representation is unstable swinging between two functions: as a representation of or about a concept (either the transcendental and/or empirical object) and/or as the transcendental conditions or grounds of representation. In the latter sense, the main task of philosophy is to describe the nature and conditions of representation, which Kant believed were *a priori*. In the former sense, philosophy is concerned with *synthetic* judgments when dealing with empirical objects.

A synthetic judgment is one that is additive, extending previous knowledge, or productive, developing knowledge by means of our interaction with the outer world and
others. Another way of viewing synthetic judgments is by comparing them with their opposite, analytical judgments, propositions in which the predicate is contained in the subject. For instance, the proposition “A bachelor is unmarried” is true because the quality predicated is contained in the subject. Thus, determining the truth or falsity of an analytical proposition is simply a matter of analysis. Synthetic propositions, on the other hand, cannot be analyzed: their truth can only be determined through empirical means. The proposition “There is a book on the table” is true only if there actually is a book on the table (not to mention the existence of a table). Leibniz had denied the existence of any truly synthetic judgments. He argues that if we knew everything about a subject, that is, if we knew all that could be predicated of it, we would know that there are necessary and sufficient reasons for its having them. Leibniz theory of pre-established harmony means that nothing is due to chance, so that there are always sufficient conditions for something being the way it is and not some other way. His belief in a God who is the cause of everything means everything has a necessary cause. Hence, “There is a book on the table” is true in virtue of there being a God who has necessarily and sufficiently pre-established that the given book be on the given table at the given time.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant sets out to determine what makes a judgment universally true. He does not accept Leibniz’s conception, since it goes beyond what we can know. Nor does he accept Hume’s analytic account that genuinely universal judgments are true in virtue of a relation of ideas, for he believes we could simply change the way we relate our ideas. Furthermore, the analytical approach cannot explain why certain judgments we consider universal always seem to apply. (For instance, that at sea level, all unsupported objects fall at a rate of 9.8 m/sec^2, that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle equals 180º, or that all events are caused.) Judgments reflect the dual nature of representation; that is, they are both *a priori* and synthetic. Therefore, the main question of the first *Critique* is “How are synthetic-*a priori* judgments possible?” It is Kant’s challenge to answer this seemingly contradictory question.

Kant calls his own philosophy transcendental, a term with a specific meaning in his system of thought. The aim of his philosophy is to investigate the conditions for knowledge in order to determine whether some of them are *a priori*. Kant believes he can show that some of these conditions are 1) necessary for knowledge, 2) universal in scope, 3) do not derive from our sensory data, and 4) reflect the way our mind deals with sensory experience. The term transcendental refers to these four *a priori* aspects of our knowledge. Transcendental philosophy goes against the approach to knowledge which asserts that our claims to knowledge can only be valid if our thoughts about objects conform to what these are really like. Kant thought his approach so revolutionary he compares it to Copernicus’ revolution.

Kant’s method, though straightforward, is very difficult to carry out. Step one is to take a presentation, a tree or rock, and then subtract any conceptual elements, such as the thought that bodies can resist force. Step two subtracts everything derived from our sense, such as color and hardness. Anything left must be the mind’s own contribution to the process of perception. The next move determines to which cognitive faculty these contributions belong.
The first section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is entitled “The Transcendental Aesthetic” and deals with perception. Kant uses the term “aesthetic” in the original meaning of the word in Greek, that is, sensation. Hence, this section deals with what is *a priori* in our sensation. The cognitive faculty in charge of sensation is the sensible intuition, a passive power that receives sensory data. Unlike Hume, Kant is not merely interested in the content of the sensible intuition, but in the form it takes. The two *pure*, or *a priori*, forms of sensible intuition are *space* and *time*. The faculty of imagination apprehends and reproduces data by a process of synthesis, “the act of arranging different representations together” in space and time.

In the “Transcendental Analytic,” Kant analyzes how the faculty of understanding turns the data presented to it by the faculty of imagination into objects of thought. Understanding depends on imagination, although “without understanding no object would be thought.” Knowledge is a combination of the senses, which “can think nothing,” and the understanding, which “can intuit nothing.” How does understanding turn sensible data into objects of thought? In other words, how do we go from perception to conception? Kant believes understanding does so by means of a set of *a priori* concepts, but how does he know which ones? Kant observes that concepts are used to form judgments. If judgments could be reduced to a few basic types, we might be able to find the most basic concepts. Here is Kant’s table of judgments and categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Judgments</th>
<th>Table of Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Of Quantity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Totality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Of Quality</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative</td>
<td>Reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infinite</td>
<td>Limitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Of Relation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorical</td>
<td>Inherence and Substance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothetical</td>
<td>Causality and Dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disjunctive</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Of Modality</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>Possibility/Impossibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertoric</td>
<td>Existence/Nonexistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apodictic</td>
<td>Necessity/Contingency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kant basically borrows his categories from Aristotle, although he uses them within his own scheme of thought. Interestingly, more than two thousand years after Aristotle, Kant believes his logic is the last word. Hence, his analysis of these categories and judgments may be understood in terms of a subject-predicate relation. The predicate is the condition on which the concept depends:

1. Quantity: The predicate includes all, some, or one of its subjects.
2. Quality: The predicate applies to some subjects and not others.
3. Relation: The predicate applies to all or some subjects and not others.
4. Modality: The predicate is or isn’t contained in the subject.

The power of understanding resides in its ability to turn perceptual representations into conceptual representations by synthesizing a predicate and a concept. There is one cognitive faculty left.

Kant defines reason as our capacity to draw inferences. This definition sounds highly logical; however, reason does not draw the same inferences as general logic does. Reason deals with transcendental logic. It seeks to explain how the general principles of general logic can be applied to objects of experience. Another way of putting it is: how does the regularity of logic apply to the world? One answer is that the world is indeed regular; logic merely reflects this fact. Kant denies we can know how nature really is, since we do not know the world directly but through the interpretation our sensible intuition, imagination, and understanding give us of it. Equally unacceptable is to think the world is systematic because reason needs it to be that way. Kant’s answer is that reason “projects,” “presupposes,” and “demands” a systematic unity of nature. Without it, “we would have no reason at all... without reason no coherent use of our understanding... and... no sufficient mark of empirical truth.” The three Ideas reason presupposes are God, the soul, and the cosmos. The regulative function of reason does not mean the understanding cannot be “the native home of illusion.” Understanding strays “as a consequence of an improper consideration of reason’s Ideas,” which after all are presuppositions and not phenomena of our experience. Antinomies, contrasting statements both of which can be proved by intellectual argument, arise when we apply space and time and the categories to these nonempirical entities.

The Critique of Pure Reason may be viewed as a solution to the empiricist-rationalist debate. The former believes all knowledge begins with experience; the latter that the mind is in possession of innate ideas which are the basis for further knowledge. Kant, on the other hand, argues that

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our senses partly of themselves produce representations, partly arouse the activity of our understanding to compare these representations, and, by combining or separating them, work up the raw material of the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is entitled experience? In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge begins.
But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.\textsuperscript{40}

Human beings perceive and conceive the world a certain way. The human mind is not the empty receptacle of empiricist psychology, but it does not contain any innate ideas, it only requires we presuppose three regulative Ideas.

For the empiricist, the limit of our knowledge is experience; for the rationalist its limits consist of innate ideas and all the possible correct inferences. For Kant the limits of human knowledge are set by the \textit{a priori} or pure conditions of the mind. Our knowledge of the world is limited to the phenomenal world, but this is a world heavily tainted by the faculties of the mind. We will never truly know the \textit{noumena} (objects as they are in themselves independent of the human mind), since we cannot stop perceiving and conceiving the world the way our minds do. One topic that is beyond the scope of pure reason is \textit{free will}. The question, “Do we have free will?” gives rise to an antinomy. \textit{Pure} reason must remain silent on this question for it involves matters that go beyond the phenomenal world; however, because the problem of free will is fundamental to any moral theory, Kant believes \textit{practical} considerations make it necessary to study it. The \textit{Critique of Practical Reason} does just that.

The preface to the \textit{Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals} offers a brief account of what morality is to Kant:

Ancient Greek philosophy was divided into three sciences: physics, ethics, and logic. This division is perfectly suitable to the nature of the thing; and the only improvement that can be made in it is to add the principle on which it is based, so that we may both satisfy ourselves of its completeness, and also be able to determine correctly the necessary subdivisions.

All rational knowledge is either material or formal: the former considers some object; the latter is concerned only with the form of the understanding and of the reason itself, and with the universal laws of thought in general without distinction of its objects. Formal philosophy is called logic. Material philosophy, however, has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject, is again twofold; for these laws are either laws of nature or of freedom. The science of the former is physics, that of the latter, ethics; they are also called natural philosophy and moral philosophy respectively.

Logic cannot have any empirical part; that is, a part in which the universal and necessary laws of thought should rest on grounds taken from experience; otherwise it would not be logic, i.e., a canon for the understanding or the reason, valid for all thought, and capable of demonstration. Natural and moral philosophy, on the contrary, can each have their empirical part, since the former has to determine the laws of nature as an object of experience; the latter the laws of the human will, so far as it is affected by nature: the former, however, being laws according to which everything does happen; the latter, laws according to which everything ought to happen. Ethics, however, must also consider the conditions under which what ought to happen frequently does not.

\textsuperscript{40} Kant, Immanuel. \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B1
We may call all philosophy empirical, so far as it is based on grounds of experience: on the other hand, that which delivers its doctrines from a priori principles alone we may call pure philosophy. When the latter is merely formal it is logic; if it is restricted to definite objects of the understanding it is metaphysics.

In this way there arises the idea of a twofold metaphysics — a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals. Physics will thus have an empirical and also a rational part. It is the same with Ethics; but here the empirical part might have the special name of practical anthropology, the name morality being appropriated to the rational part.

As my concern here is with moral philosophy, I limit the question suggested to this: Whether it is not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure thing which is only empirical and which belongs to anthropology? for that such a philosophy must be possible is evident from the common idea of duty and of the moral laws. Everyone must admit that if a law is to have moral force, i.e., to be the basis of an obligation, it must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the precept, "Thou shalt not lie," is not valid for men alone, as if other rational beings had no need to observe it; and so with all the other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the basis of obligation must not be sought in the nature of man, or in the circumstances in the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in the conception of pure reason; and although any other precept which is founded on principles of mere experience may be in certain respects universal, yet in as far as it rests even in the least degree on an empirical basis, perhaps only as to a motive, such a precept, while it may be a practical rule, can never be called a moral law.

Thus not only are moral laws with their principles essentially distinguished from every other kind of practical knowledge in which there is anything empirical, but all moral philosophy rests wholly on its pure part. When applied to man, it does not borrow the least thing from the knowledge of man himself (anthropology), but gives laws a priori to him as a rational being. No doubt these laws require a judgment sharpened by experience, in order on the one hand to distinguish in what cases they are applicable, and on the other to procure for them access to the will of the man and effectual influence on conduct; since man is acted on by so many inclinations that, though capable of the idea of a practical pure reason, he is not so easily able to make it effective in concreto in his life.

A metaphysics of morals is therefore indispensably necessary, not merely for speculative reasons, in order to investigate the sources of the practical principles which are to be found a priori in our reason, but also because morals themselves are liable to all sorts of corruption, as long as we are without that clue and supreme canon by which to estimate them correctly. For in order that an action should be morally good, it is not enough that it conform to the moral law, but it must also be done for the sake of the law, otherwise that conformity is only very contingent and uncertain; since a principle which is not moral, although it may now and then produce actions conformable to the law, will also often produce actions which contradict it. Now it is only a pure philosophy that we can look for the moral law in its purity and genuineness (and, in a practical matter, this is of the utmost consequence): we must, therefore, begin with pure philosophy (metaphysics), and without it there cannot be any moral philosophy at all. That which mingles these pure principles with the empirical does not deserve the name of philosophy (for what distinguishes philosophy from common rational knowledge is that it treats in separate sciences what the latter only
comprehends confusedly); much less does it deserve that of moral philosophy, since
by this confusion it even spoils the purity of morals themselves, and counteracts its
own end.

Let it not be thought, however, that what is here demanded is already extant in the
propaedeutic prefixed by the celebrated Wolf to his moral philosophy, namely, his so-
called general practical philosophy, and that, therefore, we have not to strike into an
entirely new field. Just because it was to be a general practical philosophy, it has not
taken into consideration a will of any particular kind — say one which should be
determined solely from \textit{a priori} principles without any empirical motives, and which we
might call a pure will, but volition in general, with all the actions and conditions which
belong to it in this general signification. By this it is distinguished from a metaphysic of
morals, just as general logic, which treats of the acts and canons of thought in
general, is distinguished from transcendental philosophy, which treats of the particular
acts and canons of pure thought, i.e., that whose cognitions are altogether \textit{a priori}. For
the metaphysic of morals has to examine the idea and the principles of a possible pure
will, and not the acts and conditions of human volition generally, which for the most
part are drawn from psychology. It is true that moral laws and duty are spoken of in
the general moral philosophy (contrary indeed to all fitness). But this is no objection,
for in this respect also the authors of that science remain true to their idea of it; they
do not distinguish the motives which are prescribed as such by reason alone altogether
\textit{a priori}, and which are properly moral, from the empirical motives which the
understanding raises to general conceptions merely by comparison of experiences;
but, without noticing the difference of their sources, and looking on them all as
homogeneous, they consider only their greater or less amount. It is in this way they
frame their notion of obligation, which, though anything but moral, is all that can be
attained in a philosophy which passes no judgment at all on the origin of all possible
practical concepts, whether they are \textit{a priori}, or only \textit{a posteriori}.\footnote{Kant, Immanuel. \textit{Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals}, preface.}

Almost all the elements of Kant’s moral theory are presented in this preface. The key
term is the will, or more appropriately, a \textit{good will}. A good will is a pure will, which, if we
remember the meaning of this term from the first \textit{Critique}, must be one that acts on \textit{a priori}
principles that are necessary, universal, not influenced by experience, and proper,
in this case, to our practical reason. Against the emotivist psychological theories
prevalent at the time, Kant argues that morality is matter of metaphysical and not
psychological enquiry.

Accordingly, a pure or good will does not take its cue from experience. For instance, it
is not good “because of what it performs or affects, not by its aptness for the attainment
of some proposed end.” Moreover, our \textit{inclinations} (passions) cannot be the spring of our
moral motivation. The sole spring of a good will, the sole source of our moral worth, lies
in doing our duty; that is, following the moral law which lies within me. Respecting and
following it makes me free, for these are the laws of freedom. What are we free from
though? Kant answers that we are free from the physical chain of cause and effect. Our
animal nature is part of nature as a whole and is thus subject to its law. By choosing to
follow the moral, I am a truly \textit{autonomous} being and not just another heteronomous
object following the laws of physics. Kant must now tell us which are the \textit{a priori}
principles that regulate our duty and concomitantly our moral conduct.

\footnote{Kant, Immanuel. \textit{Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals}, preface.}
The moral law within us is not a set of prescriptions. It is not substantive, such as a legal code is. Rather, the moral law has a form. Every action that follows this form is moral; those that do not are immoral. The form of duty is the categorical imperative. It is worth pointing out that not every situation in which we act is a moral one. Deciding which shoe to put on first in the morning does not count as a moral decision. Deciding what the best way to purchase something may or may not be. If it is a matter of buying it with cash or on credit, no moral decision is involved. However, if the cash is not yours, or you find a wallet with someone else’s ID and credit card, the decision becomes moral. A different kind of imperative is required in cases where the decision is not moral, the hypothetical imperative.

The hypothetical imperative is an imperative because it demands that you follow the most rational means in your power to achieve a non moral end. Not doing so—for instance, burning down your house to control your pest problem—would mean you are not rational. However, it is hypothetical because there are different means you can use to achieve your end. As such, the hypothetical imperative follows the form if x (the end), then A, B, or C (the means). This form should not to be confused with the logical form known as modus tollens. The logical necessity involved here is that one of the means is the best one for realizing the end and should thus be chosen.

Notice that the hypothetical imperative is procedural; so too is the categorical imperative. In any given moral situation you are to ask yourself what your maxim for it is. A maxim is a subjective principle of volition. For example, “I never take what isn’t mine.” If you followed your maxim you would not take an abandoned bag full of hundred-dollar bills. A maxim, because of its subjectivity, is not yet the moral law we are looking for. The categorical imperative asks you to elevate your maxim to the level of law, that is, to make it universal. This is done using the formula of the categorical imperative: “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Kant is asking you to assume the role of universal legislator. You are in effect willing your maxim into a law applicable to all human beings. If you can do so, then you are morally permitted to act on your maxim which is really a law and hence your duty. What keeps you from willing a racist maxim into universal law, though? What keeps you from willing a maxim that allows for lying and cheating into a universal law? Or, even more selfishly, what keeps you from legislating your exemption from a universal law?

Kant’s answer to the first question is that your maxim cannot be willed into a universal law since it excludes a certain group of people (Jews, Blacks, Asians, etc.) and thus cannot be consistently universal. In response to the second question, Kant argues that it is practically impossible to will such a law, for if such a law were instituted, it automatically destroys its own applicability: if deceiving were lawful, nobody would trust anybody, and thus no one could deceive. (After all, deception is possible due to the existence of trust.) A universal law of deception destroys the condition of lying –trust. The third question is similar to the first, except that in this case you want to exclude yourself and not others. The first and third questions deal with what are called imperfect duties, that is, duties which are morally binding although somewhat subjective. The second question refers to perfect duties which are completely objective.
The categorical imperative is categorical; that is, “it is conceived as good in itself and consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason.” It is imperative in the sense that not following it would mean we are unreasonable or immoral.

Kant offers two more formulations of the categorical imperative which are implicit in the first:

“Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”

“So act as though you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.”

The first means we are never to use ourselves or others as a means to an end. We have a perfect duty not to use ourselves or others as mere instruments. The second formulation also requires the imperfect duty of helping others achieve their ends whenever possible and whenever these ends are moral, or at least not immoral. The third formulation introduces the notion of the kingdom of ends, a hypothetical union of all rational beings under the moral law, a kind of completely rational, universal assembly. As members, we would never pass a law that was immoral. The third formulation creates the perfect duty of not legislating laws that would create illogical states of affairs, and the imperfect duty not to act on maxims that lead to undesirable states of affairs.

Kant’s moral theory is highly formal and deontological. It is often opposed to moral theories that are teleological or emotivist. Its critics contend that in its formality it doesn’t really tell us what our duty is. Others argue that its deontological spirit is based on a dual theory of man:

His account of human knowledge leads to a conception of human beings as parts of nature, whose desires, inclinations and actions are susceptible of ordinary causal explanation. Yet his account of human freedom demands that we view human agents as capable of self-determination, and specifically of determination in accordance with the principles of duty. Kant is apparently driven to a dual view of man: we are both phenomenal (natural, causally determined) beings and noumenal (non-natural, self-determining) beings. Many of Kant’s critics have held that this dual-aspect view of human beings is ultimately incoherent.  

Kant, however, believes we are only truly autonomous when we obey the moral law. Grounding morality on our inclinations or on an end is simply not indicative of our moral worth as persons: “The dignity of man consists precisely in his capacity to make universal law, although only on condition of being himself subject to the law he makes.” Kant’s political philosophy stems from the fundamental notion that autonomy or self-

---

determination is the source of our dignity. In What is the Enlightenment? Kant asserts that:

Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! “Have courage to use your own reason!” –that is the motto of enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind, after nature has long since discharged them from external direction, nevertheless remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so easy not to be of age. If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay –others will easily undertake the irksome work for me.

The Kingdom of Ends allows Kant to formulate his own conception of the social contract:

This, then, is an original contract by means of which a civil and thus completely lawful constitution and commonwealth can alone be established. But we need by no means assume that this contract (contractus originarius or pactum sociale), based on a coalition of the wills of all private individuals in a nation to form a common, public will for the purposes of rightful legislation, actually exists as a fact, for it cannot possibly be so. Such an assumption would mean that we would first have to prove from history that some nation, whose rights and obligations have been passed down to us, did in fact perform such an act, and handed down some authentic record or legal instrument, orally or in writing, before we could regard ourselves as bound by a pre-existing civil constitution. It is in fact merely an idea of reason, which nonetheless has undoubted practical reality; for it can oblige every legislator to frame his laws in such a way that they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation, and to regard each subject, insofar as he can claim citizenship, as if he had consented within the general will. This is the test of the rightfulness of every public law. For if the law is such that a whole people could not possibly agree to it (for example, if it stated that a certain class of subjects must be privileged as a hereditary ruling class), it is unjust; but if it is at least possible that a people could agree to it, it is our duty to consider the law as just.43

Self-determination requires three principles or conditions of right rule: 1. the freedom of every member of society as a human being, 2. the equality of everyone as a subject, and 3. the independence of each member of a commonwealth as a citizen. This in turn leads to Kant’s Principle of Right:

Right is the restriction of each individual’s freedom so that it harmonizes with the freedom of everyone else (insofar as this is possible within the terms of a general law).

43 Kant, Immanuel. Theory and Practice on Political Right, p. 79.
Each may seek his happiness in whatever way he sees fit, so long as he does not infringe upon the freedom of others to pursue a similar end which can be reconciled with the freedom of everyone else within a workable general law.

Each remains free to seek his happiness in whatever way he thinks best, so long as he does not violate the lawful freedom and rights of his fellow subjects at large.

Right is therefore the sum of the conditions under which the choice of one can be united with the choice of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom.

The Universal Principle of Right: “Any action is right if it can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law.”

The Universal law of Right: act externally that the free use of your choice can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law.

Strict Right rests instead on the principle of its being possible to use external constraint that can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with universal laws.

Kant’s political theory is the expression of his moral theory on a social scale. The universality of the law, its binding necessity, and the autonomy individuals have to self-determine themselves are transferred to society as a whole. Self-determination allows for coercion so as to guarantee freedom; however, coercion must be based on the Principle of Right. The authority set up for this purpose must convert the Principle of Right into positive law we can all agree on.

Having dealt with judgments concerning knowledge and morality, Kant next turns to investigating judgments of pleasure and displeasure in the Critique of Judgment. Kant argues that it is a universal power which does not merely discriminate or select.

Kant explores aesthetic judgments or judgments of taste in relation to the beautiful and the sublime. He begins with the antinomy of taste:

**Thesis**: A judgment of taste is not based on concepts; for otherwise, one could dispute about it and decide by means of proof.

**Antithesis**: A judgment of taste is based on concepts; otherwise one could not lay claim to other people’s assent.

Kant solves the antinomy by arguing that “it is because of the very fact that judgments of taste are not based on concepts that they claim to other people’s assent.” This is so because judgments of the beautiful do not refer to “the agreeableness or disagreeableness” of sensation. In other words, they are not a matter of enjoyment, for enjoyment is subjective. Judgments of the beautiful depend on form. Imagination

---

presents the form of nature to the understanding which cannot form any concept of it. Because there is no concept which can be formed, judgments of taste regarding the beautiful are disinterested; that is, they are desire free. We merely contemplate the form of nature in such a way that feeling intervenes between imagination and understanding, preventing understanding from forming any categories, such that there is no principle of predication for feeling. Judgments of beauty are not predicated on concepts such as a judgment of agreeableness (useful, pleasing, etc.). The \textit{a priori} basis of a judgment of beauty is found in the harmony between imagination and understanding. This harmony is true for everyone. This explains why claims of beauty demand universal assent.

Judgments of beauty can only be made of nature, yet because nature tends to hide its design and purpose, art is necessary to reveal them. Higher art should only be concerned with design, since only design is essential.

Judgments of the beautiful do not bring reason into play; that is, the three regulative Ideas do not apply. Judgments of the sublime do, particularly the Idea of freedom. The powers of nature produce in us a feeling of terror and inferiority; however, this initial response is followed by awe that highlights my freedom. This is the experience of the sublime.

Kant is the father of German Idealism, a school of thought that gives priority to the mind over nature. However, toward the end of his life, a new cultural and intellectual movement was brewing. Romanticism on a cultural level was a reaction against the rigid rationalism of the Enlightenment; on an intellectual level it sought to overcome the dualisms thought to exist in Kant’s thought. Both had to contend with the effects of industrialization and rising nationalism. Fichte and Schelling developed complex metaphysical systems, but soon found that these idealistic conceptions faltered in the face of real historical problems. G. F. W. Hegel tried to reconcile all these positions.

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831)**

Hegel is the most important post-Kantian German idealist. He developed a system of thought based on a unique logic. He sought to overcome the dualism found in Kant and extend knowledge to what Kant called the noumenal world. His political philosophy is considered highly intuitive by some, and the source of twentieth century German totalitarianism by others. As any highly complex and innovative philosopher, there are several interpretations of his thought. The following section is taken from Paul Redding’s article on Hegel in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy with some additions and minor editing.

Hegel's own pithy account of the nature of philosophy given in the “Preface” to his \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of Right} captures a characteristic tension in his philosophical approach and, in particular, in his approach to the nature and limits of human cognition. “Philosophy,” he says there, “is its own time raised to the level of thought.”

---

On the one hand we can clearly see in the phrase “its own time” the suggestion of an historical or cultural conditionedness and variability which applies even to the highest form of human cognition, philosophy itself. The contents of philosophical knowledge, we might suspect, will come from the historically changing contents of contemporary culture. On the other, there is the hint of such contents being “raised” to some higher level, presumably higher than other levels of cognitive functioning — those based in everyday perceptual experience, for example, or those characteristic of other areas of culture such as art and religion. This higher level takes the form of “thought,” a type of cognition commonly taken as capable of having “eternal” contents (think of Plato, for example).

This antithetical combination within human cognition of the temporally-conditioned and the eternal, a combination which reflects a broader conception of the human being as what Hegel describes elsewhere as a “finite-infinite,” has led to Hegel being regarded in different ways by different types of philosophical readers. For example, an historically-minded pragmatist like Richard Rorty, distrustful of all claims or aspirations to the “God's-eye view,” could praise Hegel as a philosopher who had introduced this historically reflective dimension into philosophy (and setting it on the characteristically “hermeneutic” path which has predominated in modern continental philosophy) but who had unfortunately still remained bogged down in the remnants of the Platonist idea of the search for ahistorical truths. Those adopting such an approach to Hegel tend to have in mind the (relatively) young author of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and have tended to dismiss as “metaphysical” later and more systematic works like the *Science of Logic*. In contrast, the British Hegelian movement at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, tended to ignore the *Phenomenology* and the more historicist dimensions of his thought, and found in Hegel a systematic metaphysician whose *Logic* provided a systematic and definitive philosophical ontology of an idealist type. This latter traditional “metaphysical” view of Hegel dominated Hegel reception for most of the twentieth century, but has over the last few decades been contested by many Hegel scholars who have offered an alternative “post-Kantian” view of Hegel.

Given the understanding of Hegel that predominated at the time of the birth of analytic philosophy together with the fact that early analytic philosophers were rebelling precisely against “Hegelianism” so understood, the “Hegel” encountered in discussions within analytic philosophy is often that of the late nineteenth-century interpretation. In this picture, Hegel is seen as offering a metaphysico-religious view of God *qua* “Absolute Spirit” or *Weltgeist* which has much in common with the type of elaborate idealist and theo-centric metaphysics found in Leibniz. Inasmuch as Leibniz had exemplified the “dogmatic” metaphysics against which Kant had rebelled, understood in this way Hegel is much more a *pre*- than *post-*Kantian thinker. Indeed, Hegel often seems to invoke imagery consistent with the types of neo-Platonic conceptions of the universe that had been common within Christian mysticism, especially in the German states, in the early modern period. The peculiarity of Hegel's form of idealism, on this account, lies in his idea that the mind of God becomes actual only via its particularization in the minds of “his” finite creatures. Thus, in our consciousness of God, we somehow serve to realize his own self-consciousness, and, thereby, his own perfection. With its dark mystical roots, and its overtly religious content, it is hardly surprising that the philosophy of Hegel so understood is regarded as being very distant to the largely secular and “scientific” conceptions of philosophy that have been dominant in the twentieth century.
An important consequence of Hegel's metaphysics, so understood, concerns history and the idea of historical development or progress, and it is as an advocate of an idea concerning the logically-necessitated teleological course of history that Hegel is most often derided. To many critics, Hegel had not only advocated a disastrous political conception of the state and the relation of its citizens to it, a conception prefiguring twentieth-century totalitarianism, but he had also tried to underpin such advocacy with dubious logico-metaphysical speculations. With his idea of the development of “spirit” in history, Hegel is seen as literalizing a way of talking about different cultures in terms of their “spirits,” of constructing a developmental sequence of epochs typical of nineteenth-century ideas of linear historical progress, and then enveloping this story of human progress in terms of one about the developing self-conscious of the cosmos-God itself.

As the bottom line of such an account concerned the evolution of states of a mind (God's), such an account is clearly an idealist one, but not in the sense, say, of Berkeley. The pantheistic legacy inherited by Hegel meant that he had no problem in considering an objective outer world beyond any particular subjective mind. But this objective world itself had to be understood as conceptually informed: it was objectified spirit. Thus in contrast to Berkeleyan “subjective idealism” it became common to talk of Hegel as incorporating the “objective idealism” of views, especially common among German historians, in which social life and thought were understood in terms of the conceptual or “spiritual” structures that informed them. But in contrast to both forms of idealism, Hegel, according to this reading, postulated a form of absolute idealism by including both subjective life and the objective cultural practices on which subjective life depended within the dynamics of the development of the self-consciousness and self-actualization of God, the “Absolute Spirit.”

Despite this seemingly dominant theological theme, Hegel was still seen by many as an important precursor of other more characteristically secular strands of modern thought such as existentialism and Marxist materialism. Existentialists were thought of as taking the idea of the finitude and historical and cultural dependence of individual subjects from Hegel, and as leaving out all pretensions to the “absolute,” while Marxists were thought of as taking the historical dynamics of the Hegelian picture but reinterpreting this in materialist rather than idealist categories.

The term “phenomenology” had been coined by the German scientist and mathematician (and Kant correspondent) J. H. Lambert (1728-1777), and in a letter to Lambert, sent to accompany a copy of his “Inaugural Dissertation” (1770), Kant had proposed a “general phenomenology” as a necessary “propaedeutic” presupposed by the science of metaphysics. Such a phenomenology was meant to determine the “validity and limitations” of what he called the “principles of sensibility,” principles he had (he thought) shown in the accompanying work to be importantly different to those of conceptual thought. The term clearly suited Kant as he had distinguished the “phenomena” known through the faculty of sensibility from the “noumena” known purely conceptually. This envisioned “phenomenology” seems to coincide roughly with what he was to eventually entitle a “critique of pure reason,” although Kant's thought had gone through important changes by the time that he came to publish the work.
There is clearly some continuity between this Kantian notion and Hegel's project. In a sense Hegel's phenomenology is a study of "phenomena" (although this is not a realm he would contrast with that of "noumena") and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is likewise to be regarded as a type of "propaedeutic" to philosophy rather than an exercise in it—a type of induction or education of the reader to the "standpoint" of purely conceptual thought of philosophy itself. As such, its structure has been compared to that of an educational novel, having an abstractly conceived protagonist—the bearer of an evolving series of "shapes of consciousness" or the inhabitant of a series of successive phenomenal worlds—whose progress and setbacks the reader follows and learns from. Or at least this is how the work sets out: in the later sections the earlier series of "shapes of consciousness" becomes replaced with what seem more like configurations of human social existence, and the work comes to look more like an account of interlinked forms of social existence and thought, the series of which maps onto the history of western European civilization from the Greeks to Hegel's own time. The fact that it ends in the attainment of "Absolute Knowing," the standpoint from which real philosophy gets done, seems to support the traditionalist reading in which a "triumphalist" narrative of the growth of western civilization is combined with the theological interpretation of God's self-manifestation and self-comprehension.

Something of Hegel's phenomenological method may be conveyed by the first few chapters, which are perhaps among the more conventionally philosophical parts. Chapters 1 to 3 effectively follow a developmental series of distinct "shapes of consciousness"—jointly epistemological and ontological attitudes articulated by criteria which are, regarded from one direction, criteria for certain knowledge, and from the other, criteria for independent objecthood. In chapter 1, the attitude of "sense-certainty" takes immediately given singular perceptual contents as the fundamental objects known. By following this form of consciousness's attempts to make these implicit criteria explicit, we are meant to appreciate that any such contents, even the apparently most "immediate" ones, in fact contain implicit conceptually articulated presuppositions, and so, in Hegel's terminology, are "mediated." One might compare Hegel's point here to that expressed by Kant in his well known claim that without concepts, those singular and immediate mental representations he calls "intuitions" are "blind."

By the end of this chapter our protagonist consciousness (and by implication, we the audience to this drama) has learnt that the nature of consciousness cannot be as originally thought: rather than being immediate and singular, its contents must have some implicit universal (conceptual) aspect to them. Consciousness thus now commences anew with its new implicit criterion—the assumption that since the contents of consciousness are "universal" they must be publicly graspable by others as well. Hegel's name for this type of perceptual realism in which any individual's idiosyncratic private apprehension will always be in principle correctable by the experience of others is "perception." In contrast to the object of "sense-certainty", the object of "perception" is first conceived in a quasi-Aristotelian way—it is internally complex such that some underlying self-identical substrate is thought of as the bearer of accidental and changeable properties. As in the case of "sense-certainty," here again, by following the protagonist consciousness's efforts to make this implicit criterion explicit, we see how the criterion generates contradictions which eventually undermine it as a criterion for certainty. In fact, such collapse into a type of self-generated skepticism is typical of all
the “shapes” we follow in the work, and there seems something inherently skeptical about such reflexive cognitive processes. But Hegel's point is equally that there has always been something positive that has been learned in such processes and this learning is more than that which consists in the mere elimination of epistemological dead-ends.

Rather, as in the way that the internal contradictions that emerged from sense-certainty had generated a new shape, perception, the collapse of any given attitude always involves the emergence of some new implicit criterion which will be the basis of a new emergent attitude. In the case of “perception,” the emergent new shape of consciousness is what Hegel calls “understanding”—a shape which he identifies with scientific cognition rather than that of the more everyday “perception.” Furthermore, the process reveals something about the nature of all such objects of consciousness—the fact that they necessarily change into something other than themselves. In Hegel's terminology, they are “contradictory.”

The transition from Chapter 3 to Chapter 4, “The Truth of Self-Certainty,” also marks a more general transition from “consciousness” to “self-consciousness.” It is in the course of Chapter 4 that we find what is perhaps the most well-known part of the *Phenomenology*, the account of the “struggle of recognition” in which Hegel examines the intersubjective conditions which he sees as necessary for any form of “consciousness.”

Like Kant, Hegel thinks that one's capacity to be “conscious” of some external object as something distinct from oneself requires the reflexivity of “self-consciousness,” that is, it requires one's awareness of oneself as a subject for whom something distinct, the object, is presented as known. Hegel goes beyond Kant, however, and expanding on an idea found in Fichte, makes this requirement dependent on one's recognition of other self-conscious subjects as self-conscious subjects, and, moreover, on one's recognition of them as similarly recognizing oneself as a self-conscious subject. Such patterns of mutual recognition constituting “objective spirit” thereby provide the matrix within which individual self-consciousnesses can exist as such. It is in this way that the *Phenomenology* can change course, the earlier tracking of “shapes of consciousness” effectively coming to be replaced by the tracking of distinct patterns of “mutual recognition” between subjects, shapes of “spirit” itself.

It is thus that Hegel has effected the transition from a phenomenology of “subjective mind,” as it were, to one of “objective spirit,” thought of as culturally distinct patterns of social interaction analyzed in terms of the patterns of reciprocal recognition they embody. (“Geist” can be translated as either “mind” or “spirit,” but the latter, allowing a more cultural sense, as in the phrase “spirit of the age” or “Zeitgeist”).

Hegel's discussion of spirit starts from what he calls “Sittlichkeit” (translated as “ethical order” or “ethical substance”—“Sittlichkeit” being a nominalization from the adjectival (or adverbial) form “sittlich,” “customary,” from the stem “Sitte,” “custom” or “convention.”) Thus Hegel might be seen as adopting the viewpoint that since social life is ordered by customs we can approach the lives of those living in it in terms of the patterns of those customs or conventions themselves — the conventional practices, as it were, constituting specific, shareable *forms of life* made actual in the lives of particular
individuals who had in turn *internalized* such general patterns in the process of acculturation. It is not obvious that Hegel is in any way committed to any metaphysical supra-individual conscious being with such usages.

To take an example, in the second section of the chapter “Spirit,” Hegel discusses “culture” as the “world of self-alienated spirit.” The idea seems to be that humans in society not only interact, but that they collectively create relatively enduring cultural products (stories, dramas, and so forth) within which they can recognize their own patterns of life as reflected. Furthermore, such cultural products themselves provide conditions allowing individuals to adopt particular cognitive attitudes.

We might think that if Kant had written the *Phenomenology*, he would have ended it at Chapter 6 with the modern moral subject as the telos of the story. For Kant, the practical knowledge of morality, orienting one within the *noumenal* world, exceeds the scope of theoretical knowledge which had been limited to phenomena. Hegel, however, thought that philosophy had to unify theoretical and practical knowledge, and so the *Phenomenology* has further to go. Again, this is seen differently by traditionalists and revisionists. For traditionalists, Chapters 7, “Religion” and 8, “Absolute Knowing,” testify to Hegel's disregard for Kant's critical limitation of theoretical knowledge to empirical experience. Revisionists, on the other hand, tend to see Hegel as furthering the Kantian critique into the very coherence of a conception of an “in-itself” reality which is beyond the limits of our theoretical (but not practical) cognition. However we understand this, absolute knowing is the standpoint to which Hegel has hoped to bring the reader in this complex work. This is the “standpoint of science,” the standpoint from which philosophy proper commences, and it commences in Hegel's next book, the *Science of Logic*.

A glance at the table of contents of *Science of Logic* reveals the same triadic structuring noted among the “shapes of consciousness” in the *Phenomenology*. At the highest level of its branching structure there are three “books,” devoted to the doctrines of “being,” “essence,” and “concept” respectively. In turn, each book has three sections, each section containing three chapters, and so on. In general each of these nodes deals with some particular category or “thought determination,” sometimes the first subheading under a node having the same name as the node itself. In fact, Hegel's categorical triads appear to repeat Kant's own triadic way of articulating the categories in the “Table of Categories,” in which the third term in the triad in some way integrates the first two.

Reading into the first chapter of Book 1, “Being,” it is quickly seen that the *Logic* repeats the movements of the first chapters of the *Phenomenology*, now, however, at the level of “thought” rather than conscious experience. Thus, “being” is the thought determination with which the work commences because it at first seems to be the most “immediate,” fundamental determination characterizing any possible thought content at all. Again parallel to the *Phenomenology*, it is the effort of thought to make such contents explicit that both undermines them and brings about new contents. “Being” *seems* to be both “immediate” and simple, but reflection reveals that it itself is, in fact, only meaningful in opposition to another concept, “nothing.” In fact, the attempt to think “being” as immediate, and so as not *mediated* by its opposing concept “nothing,” has so deprived it of any determinacy or meaning at all that it effectively *becomes* nothing. That
is, on reflection it is grasped as having passed over into its "negation". Thus, while "being" and "nothing" seem both absolutely distinct and opposed, from another point of view they appear the same as no criterion can be invoked which differentiates them. The only way out of this paradox is to posit a third category, "becoming," which seems to save thinking from paralysis because it accommodates both concepts: "becoming" contains "being" and "nothing" since when something "becomes" it passes, as it were, between nothingness and being. That is, when something becomes it seems to possess aspects of both being and nothingness, and it is in this sense that the third category of such triads can be understood as containing the first two "moments."

In general this is how the Logic proceeds: seeking its most basic and universal determination, thought posits a category to be reflected upon, finds then that this collapses due to a "contradiction" generated, but then seeks a further category with which to make retrospective sense of that contradiction. This new category is more complex as it has internal structure in the way that "becoming" contains "being" and "nothing" as moments. But in turn the new category will generate some further contradictory negation and again the demand will arise for a further concept which will reconcile these opposed concepts by incorporating them as moments. Such a method invoking "determinate negation" is often described as deriving from Spinoza's claim that "all determination is negation," but it can be just as readily seen as a consequence of Hegel's use of Aristotle's term logic. In term logics, negation is understood as a relation existing primarily between terms of the same type: a color concept such as "red," for example, will be understood as meaningful insomuch as it stands in opposition to an array of contrary color terms such as "blue," "green," and so on. In contrast, in logics which take the proposition as the fundamental semantic unit (such as the classical predicate calculus deriving from Frege and accepted by most analytic philosophers), negation is typically regarded as applying primarily to whole propositions rather than to sub-sentential units.

Regardless of how we interpret this however, it is important to grasp that for Hegel logic is not simply a science of the form of our thoughts but is also a science of actual "content" as well, and as such is a type of ontology. Thus it is not just about the concepts "being," "nothing," "becoming" and so on, but about being, nothing, becoming and so on, themselves. This in turn is linked to Hegel's radically non-representationalist (and in some sense "direct realist") understanding of thought. The world is not "represented" in thought by a type of "proxy" standing for it, but rather is presented, exhibited, or made manifest in it.

The thought determinations of Book 1 lead eventually into those of Book 2, "The Doctrine of Essence." Naturally the structures implicit in "essence" thinking are more developed than those of "being" thinking. Crucially, the contrasting pair "essence" and "appearance" allow the thought of some underlying reality which manifests itself through a different overlying appearance, a relation not able to be captured in the simpler "being" structures. But distinctions such as "essence" and "appearance" will themselves instantiate the relation of determinate negation, and the metaphysical tendency to think of reality as made up of some underlying substrates in contrast to the superficial appearances will itself come to grief with the discovery that the notion of an "essence" is only meaningful in contrast to the "appearance" that it is meant to explain away. For
Hegel it is the complex modern, but pre-Kantian, versions of substance metaphysics like those of Spinoza and Leibniz that bring out in the most developed way the inherent contradictory nature of this form of thought.

Book 3, “The Doctrine of Concept,” affects a shift from the “Objective Logic” of Books 1 and 2, to “Subjective Logic,” and metaphysically coincides with a shift to the modern subject-based ontology of Kant. Just as Kantian philosophy is founded on a conception of objectivity secured by conceptual coherence, Concept-logic commences with the concept of “concept” itself. While in the two books of objective logic, the movement had been between particular concepts, “being,” “nothing,” “becoming” etc., in the subjective logic, the conceptual relations are grasped at a meta-level, such that the concept “concept” treated in Chapter 1 of section 1 (“Subjectivity”) passes over into that of “judgment” in Chapter 2, as judgments are the larger wholes within which concepts gain their proper content. For Hegel just as a concept gains its determinacy in the context of the judgments within which it is applied, so too do judgments gain their determinacy within larger patterns of inference. When Hegel declares the syllogism to be “the truth” of the judgment, he might be thought, as has been suggested by Robert Brandon, to be advocating a view somewhat akin to contemporary “inferentialist” approaches to semantics. On these approaches, an utterance gains its semantic content not from any combination of its already meaningful sub-sentential components, but from the particular inferential “commitments and entitlements” acquired when it is offered to others in practices presupposing the asking for and giving of reasons. Thought of in terms of the framework of Kant’s “transcendental logic,” Hegel’s position would be akin to allowing inferences — “syllogisms” — a role in the determination of “transcendental content,” a role which inference definitely does not have in Kant.

As already noted, for Hegel, the logic of inference has a “transcendental content” in a way analogous to that possessed by the logic of judgment in Kant’s transcendental logic. It is this which is behind the idea that the treatment of the formal syllogisms of inference will lead to a consideration of those syllogisms as “pregnant with content.” But for logic to be truly ontological a further step “beyond” Kant is necessary. For the post-Kantians, Kant had been mistaken in restricting the conditions of experience and thought to a “subjective” status. Kant’s idea of our knowledge as restricted to the world as it is for us requires us to have a concept of the noumenal as that which cannot be known, the concept “noumena” playing the purely negative role of giving a determinate sense to “phenomenon” by specifying its limits. That is, for Kant we need to be able to think of our experience and knowledge as finite and conditioned, and this is achieved in terms of a concept of a realm we cannot know. But, as the principle of determinate negation implies, if the concept “noumena” is to provide some sort of boundary to that of “phenomenon,” then it cannot be the merely negative concept that Kant supposed. Only a concept with a content can determine the limits of the content of some other concept (as when our empirical concept of “river,” for example, is made determinate by opposing empirical concepts like “stream” or “creek”). The positing of a noumenal realm must be the positing of a realm about which we can have some understanding.

This need felt by the post-Kantians for having a contentful concept of the “noumenal” or the “in itself” can also be seen from the inverse perspective. For Kant, sensation testifies to the existence of an objective noumenal world beyond us, but this world
cannot be known as such: we can only know that world as it appears to us from within the constraints of the subjective conditions of our experience and thought. But for Hegel, this attributes to a wholly inadequate form of cognition (sensation or feeling) a power that is being denied to a much better form — that articulated by concepts. To think that our inarticulate sensations or feelings give us a truer account of reality than that of which we are capable via the scientific exercise of conceptualized thought indicates a type of irrationalist potential lurking within Kantian thought, a potential that Hegel thought was being realized by the approach of his romantic contemporaries. The rational kernel of Kant's approach, then, had to be carried beyond the limits of a method in which the conditions of thought and experience were regarded as merely subjective. Rather than restrict its scope to “formal” conditions of experience and thought, it had to be understood as capable of revealing the objective or material conditions. Transcendental logic must thereby become ontological.

Throughout the succession of transitions between shapes of phenomenal objectivity in the *Phenomenology*, or between different “thought determinations” in the *Logic*, Hegel appeals to the “negativity” involved when thought's objects turn into their determining opposites. As Hegel points out, the sense-certaintist's certainty in the objectivity of what is present to her “here” and “now” becomes confounded when what is “here” and “now” becomes something “there” and “then.” This contradiction refutes the sense-certaintist’s criteria of objectivity, but it also, for Hegel, reveals a truth about reality: it reveals its fundamentally self-negating character. That a content that is now becomes something then is not some accidental fact about such contents. This might now be thought to coincide with Hegel’s peculiar attitude to the “antinomies” within which, according to Kant, reason becomes entangled when it tries to give content to its properly “regulative” ideas. For Kant, it reveals the limits beyond which “pure reason,” in its theoretical use, cannot go; for Hegel, it reveals the contradictory nature of reason's proper objects. Thus while in a certain sense Hegel agrees with Kant's diagnosis of internally contradictory nature of pure reason itself, his interpretation of the significance of this phenomenon is radically different to that given by Kant.

Again this works at a variety of levels. Consider the attitude towards objectivity roughly correlating with “perception” in which the stability of the identity of some individual substance is purchased by making a distinction between its essential and accidental properties, for example. Thus, while we initially think of the wax as white, solid, cold and so on, on reflection we come to think of that wax as that which endures throughout changes in such properties: it is essentially, then, neither white nor colorless, solid nor liquid, and so on. From Aristotle’s ontological standpoint, the essence-accident distinction had been invoked to deal with the “contradiction” involved in thinking, for example, that a piece of wax was both white and colorless, both solid and liquid. But, as was suggested earlier, the introduced essence-accident or reality-appearance distinction to which appeal is made here will, from a Hegelian point of view, itself instantiate the relation of determinate negation. That is, the substrate underlying the properties — the thing which bears the properties — cannot be some “I know not what;” it must itself have some thinkable content. This will lead thought to the positing of forces or powers that are the true defining essences of such individual substances, but this move in turn means that what it is that makes the wax what it is can no longer be regarded as something that is stable and self-identical beneath its superficial changes. Forces and
powers cannot be thought of in this way. They are forms of objectivity that we posit only inasmuch as they have effects and, moreover, they are such that they, in some sense, dissipate themselves in their effects.

It is with his critique of "the law of identity," and the postulation of his version of the "law of contradiction" (the law that everything is contradictory) that Hegel's controversial attitude to logical contradiction comes to the fore. Again in must be remembered, however, that Hegel's logic is not a formal one but a transcendental one: he is not, it would seem, claiming that the conjunct of a proposition and its negation can be true. However, it does seem that he is denying that the law of noncontradiction can stand as a normative law for actual thinking. The law of noncontradiction, it would seem, presupposes the abstract self-identity and enduring nature of the contents that are thought, and this, as we have seen, appears to be incompatible with the very process of determinate negation through which thought achieves its determinate contents.

The Philosophy of Right can be, and has been, read as a political philosophy which stands independently of the system, but it is clear that Hegel intended it to be read against the background of the developing conceptual determinations of the Logic. The text proper starts from the conception of a singular willing subject (grasped from its own first-person point of view) as the bearer of "abstract right." While this conception of the individual willing subject with some kind of fundamental right is in fact the starting point of many modern political philosophies (such as that of Locke, for example) the fact that Hegel commences here does not testify to any ontological assumption that the consciously willing and right-bearing individual is the basic atom from which all society can be understood as constructed — an idea at the heart of standard "social contract" theories. Rather, this is merely the most "immediate" starting point of Hegel's presentation and corresponds to analogous starting places of the Logic. Just as the categories of the Logic develop in a way meant to demonstrate that what had at the start been conceived as simple is in fact only made determinate in virtue of its being part of some larger structure or process, here too it is meant to be shown that any simple willing and right-bearing subject only gains its determinacy in virtue of a place it finds for itself in a larger social, and ultimately historical, structure or process. Thus even a contractual exchange (the minimal social interaction for contract theorists) is not to be thought simply as an occurrence consequent upon the existence of two beings with natural wants and some natural calculative rationality; rather, the system of interaction within which individual exchanges take place (the economy) will be treated holistically as a culturally-shaped form of social life within which the actual wants of individuals as well as their reasoning powers are given determinate forms.

Here too it becomes apparent that Hegel treats property in terms of a recognize analysis of the nature of such a right. A contractual exchange of commodities between two individuals itself involves an implicit act of recognition in as much as each, in giving something to the other in exchange for what they want, is thereby recognizing that other as a proprietor of that thing, or, more properly, of the inalienable value attaching to it. By contrast, such proprietorship would be denied rather than recognized in fraud or theft — forms of "wrong" in which right is negated rather than acknowledged or posited. Thus what differentiates property from mere possession is that it is grounded in a relation of reciprocal recognition between two willing subjects. Moreover, it is in the exchange
relation that we can see what it means for Hegel for individual subjects to share a “common will” — an idea which will have important implications with respect to the difference of Hegel's conception of the state from that of Rousseau. Such an interactive constitution of the *common will* means that for Hegel such an identity of will is achieved *because of* not *in spite of* a coexisting *difference* between the particular wills of the subjects involved: while contracting individuals both “will” *the same* exchange, at a more concrete level, they do with different ends in mind. Each wants something different *from* the exchange.

Hegel passes from the abstract individualism of “Abstract Right” to the social determinacies of “Sittlichkeit” or “Ethical Life” via considerations first of “wrong” (the negation of right) and its punishment (the negation of wrong, and hence the “negation of the negation” of the original right), and then of “morality,” conceived more or less as an internalization of the external legal relations. Consideration of Hegel's version of the retributivist approach to punishment affords a good example of his use of the logic of “negation.” In punishing the criminal the state makes it clear to its members that it is the acknowledgment of right *per se* that is essential to developed social life: the significance of “acknowledging another’s right” in the contractual exchange cannot be, as it at first might have appeared to the participants, simply that of being a way of each getting what he or she wants *from the other*. Hegel's treatment of punishment also brings out the continuity of his way of conceiving of the structure and dynamics of the social world with that of Kant, as Kant too, in his *Metaphysics of Morals* had employed the idea of the state's punitive action as a *negating* of the original criminal act. Kant's idea, conceived on the model of the physical principle of action and reaction, was structured by the category of “community” or reciprocal interaction, and was conceived as involving what he called “real opposition.” Such an idea of opposed dynamic forces seems to form something of a model for Hegel's idea of contradiction and the starting point for his conception of reciprocal recognition.

First of all, in Hegel's analysis of *Sittlichkeit* the type of sociality found in the market-based “civil society” is to be understood as dependent upon and in contrastive opposition with the more immediate form found in the institution of the family — a form of sociality mediated by a quasi-natural intersubjective recognition rooted in sentiment and feeling: love. In the family the particularity of each individual tends to be absorbed into the social unit, giving this manifestation of *Sittlichkeit* a one-sidedness that is the inverse of that found in market relations in which participants grasp themselves in the first instance as separate individuals who then enter into relationships that are external to them.

These two opposite but interlocking principles of social existence provide the basic structures in terms of which the component parts of the modern state are articulated and understood. As both contribute particular characteristics to the subjects involved in them, part of the problem for the rational state will be to ensure that each of these two principles mediates the other, each thereby mitigating the *one-sidedness* of the other. Thus, individuals who encounter each other in the “external” relations of the marketplace and who have their subjectivity shaped by such relations also belong to families where they are subject to opposed influences. Moreover, even within the ensemble of production and exchange mechanisms of civil society individuals will belong to particular
“estates” (the agricultural estate, that of trade and industry, and the “universal estate” of civil servants), whose internal forms of sociality will show family-like features.

The modern “rational” state must provide an answer to Rousseau’s question of the form of association needed for the formation and expression of the “general will.”

Concretely, for Hegel it is representation of the estates within the legislative bodies that is to achieve this. As the estates of civil society group their members according to their common interests, and as the deputies elected from the estates to the legislative bodies give voice to those interests within the deliberative processes of legislation, we might see how the outcome of this process might be considered to give expression to the general interest. But Hegel’s “republicanism” is here cut short by his invocation of the familial principle: such representative bodies can only provide the content of the legislation to a constitutional monarch who must add to it the form of the royal decree — an individual “I will .....” To declare that for Hegel the monarch plays only a “symbolic” role here is to miss the fundamentally idealist complexion of his political philosophy. The expression of the general will in legislation cannot be thought of as an outcome of some quasi-mechanical process: it must be willed. If legislation is to express the general will, citizens must recognize it as expressing their wills; and this means, recognizing it as willed. The monarch’s explicit “I will” is thus needed to close this recognitive circle, lest legislation look like a mechanical compromise resulting from a clash of interests, and so as actively willed by nobody. Thus while Hegel is critical of standard “social contract” theories, his own conception of the state is still clearly a complicated transformation of those of Rousseau and Kant.

Perhaps one of the most influential parts of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right concerns his analysis of the contradictions of the unfettered capitalist economy. On the one hand, Hegel agreed with Adam Smith that the interlinking of productive activities allowed by the modern market meant that “subjective selfishness” turned into a “contribution towards the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else.” But this did not mean that he accepted Smith’s idea that this “general plenty” produced thereby diffused (or “trickled down”) through the rest of society. From within the type of consciousness generated within civil society, in which individuals are grasped as “bearers of rights” abstracted from the particular concrete relationships to which they belong, Smithian optimism may seem justified. But this simply attests to the one-sidedness of this type of abstract thought, and the need for it to be mediated by the type of consciousness based in the family in which individuals are grasped in terms of the way they belong to the social body. In fact, the unfettered operations of the market produce a class caught in a spiral of poverty. Starting from this analysis, Marx later used it as evidence of the need to abolish the individual proprietorial rights at the heart of Hegel’s “civil society” and socialize the means of production. Hegel, however, did not draw this conclusion. His conception of the exchange contract as a form of recognition that played an essential role within the state’s capacity to provide the conditions for the existence of rational and free-willing subjects would certainly prevent such a move. Rather, the economy was to be contained within an overarching institutional framework of the state, and its social effects offset by welfarist state intervention.
Karl Marx (1818 – 1883)

Karl Marx is the father of modern communism. His philosophy has inspired many revolutions that have sought to apply his ideas. Countries such as Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Cuba, China, Vietnam, North Korea, Angola, Nicaragua, among others, have at some time in their history been ruled by interpretations of this German philosopher’s thought. Some countries still follow many of his basic tenets, and some revolutionary movements are still inspired by them. Marx was not only a philosopher, but also a historian and economist. His philosophy in many ways is a reaction to the liberal tradition with its emphasis on formal rights (versus material rights, such as food, clothing, healthcare) and its justification of social material inequalities. One of Marx’s basic theses is that material equality must be guaranteed by the state. Human dignity is very much based on our material existence, and not, as liberals believe, on our freedom to do as we choose within the rule of law. If Marx sounds odd to you, he thought this was natural, since people are immersed in an ideology that does not allow them to see things objectively. And here we have the second major theses, namely that there are objective laws that people can discover if they analyze history correctly. Marx’s three main concerns are inherent to these two problems: history, economics, and philosophy. Here is a sketch of his thought.

- The material needs of human beings are prior to any others.
- The first act of human history is the satisfaction of these needs.
- Humans enter into relations to satisfy these needs.
- All other relations are causally dependent on the economic relation.
- The history of human society must be studied bearing in mind this causal dependence.
- Marx thinks his theory, which he calls scientific socialism, not only bears this relation in mind, but is also as serious as physics or chemistry.
- Marx’s theory of objective development states that human history is subject to objective laws, just as nature is also.
- Human relations are not the result of the human will but of this objective development.
- This development follows a dialectical process (patterned on Hegel’s dialectic process).
- Marx calls this dialectical materialism.
- The modes of production of societies have hitherto been the arena for class struggles.
- Primitive communism gave way to slavery as a mode of production (Greece, Rome, etc.).
- Slavery pitted slaves against masters and gave way to feudalism (Western Europe).
- Feudalism pitted serfs against lords and gave way to capitalism (the world).
- Capitalism pits the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.
- Inevitably, capitalism must give way to socialism and communism.
- The reason modes of production give way to new ones is that each one contains an inherent contradiction that ultimately brings about its collapse.
- These contradictions, due to each mode’s internal laws, cause class struggles.
The inherent contradiction of capitalism has its starting point in the laws that drive people to go into business: profit. Marx explains it through his labor theory of value.

Under capitalism, the price of a given product is not the equivalent of the labor that went into producing it; it is higher.

This “extra” amount or surplus value—the profit—is not the result of labor.

Because of competition, capitalists cannot simply spend much of their profit but must reinvest it continually (remember Smith).

Those businesses that accumulate the largest amount of profit will succeed, while small business will tend to go bankrupt.

The centralization of capital in fewer hands—big business—is inevitable.

The forces of accumulation and centralization do not mean that labor, that is, the proletariat, will benefit. On the contrary, they will grow poorer and poorer.

According to Marx, the proletariat cannot get the full value of their labor because of the “industrial reserve army,” the army of unemployed workers that will forever keep wages down (remember Ricardo).

The mass of impoverished proletariat will ultimately revolt and bring down the system.

Thus, capitalism produces its own downfall through its own laws of competition, accumulation and centralization.

It seems Marx’s predictions—such as the one quoted below—have not come true. In 1917 it seemed Marx was right; however, history has not been favorable to Marx’s interpretation of its development, especially after the events of 1989-1991.

Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labor at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. Thus integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.47

Most modern liberals would probably agree with the following assessments contrary to Marx:

The distant origins of the present volume lie in an article entitled “The End of History?” which I wrote for the journal The National Interest in the summer of 1989. In it, I argued that a remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world over the past few years, as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism. More than that, however, I argued that liberal democracy may constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and the “final form of human government,” and as such constituted the “end of history.” That is, while earlier forms

of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions.  

More important, I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement... Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs. J. S. Mill’s suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word.

Marx’s philosophy is a testament to a time when the industrial revolution was at its worst. However, in his lifetime, and in his country, the modern welfare state was born. Marx did not think a welfare state would last, since it is still capitalist. Many people use the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as proof that communism does not work. They also point to developments in China where communism is apparently giving way to capitalism. Marxist counter that all these countries never implemented his ideas correctly; that is, “real existing socialism” is not Marxist socialism. Marxist socialism or communism is very much like a religion: it has an answer to just about anything. It is also similar in that we have to believe it in faith, although Marx would disagree, after all, his philosophy is scientific. Marx’s philosophy was part of the scientific trend in European philosophy that goes back to the empiricists and the very origins of modern science. It also integrates historical elements in line with the increasing importance placed on “scientific” history in the nineteenth century.

**Utilitarianism**

The eighteenth century saw the rise of the most influential moral, economic and political theories of the last two centuries. Utilitarianism as developed by the British thinkers Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873), is based on a hedonistic principle, namely that happiness is the result of a balance of pleasure over pain. Bentham believed that a hedonic calculus was mathematically possible if we could sum up units of pleasure and pain for everyone who would be affected now and in the future due to an act or decision. Naturally, such a calculus is extremely difficult to carry out in practice, though theoretically possible.

Utilitarianism is a teleological, or to use a more modern term, consequentialist moral theory that can be extended to include not only moral acts, but political and economic ones as well. An action is right if and only if it tends to promote the happiness of the individual who performs it or anyone affected by it. It is wrong if it doesn’t: “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as

---


they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and
the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”\textsuperscript{50} It is easy to
see how this principle can be applied to political and economic theory. Mill’s formulation
of the \textit{Principle of Utility}, the greatest happiness for the greatest number, may be applied
to determine whether a legislative initiative is valid or not. Utilitarianism is in opposition
to egoist and duty based ethics. Contrary to what Socrates believes, utilitarianism holds
that it is possible to the right thing from a bad motive.

There are at least four kinds of utilitarian theories: act, rule, ideal, and negative. \textit{Act utilitarianism} is the one just described. \textit{Rule utilitarianism} is a response to a criticism that
was usually leveled against it, namely, that the principle of utility condones certain
instances of lying, stealing, or cheating if its consequences are for the most part good.
Rule utilitarianism asserts that there are unbreakable rules, which in turn are derived
from the general principle of utility, which can be followed. Hence, lying, even on one
occasion, would lead to widespread lying and would have generally negative
consequences. \textit{Ideal utilitarianism} gives certain nonhedonistic values such as love,
knowledge, and beauty an intrinsic value independent of pleasure. Finally, recent
developments have led some utilitarians to argue that the only moral obligation the
principle of utility demands is the elimination of suffering, a view known as \textit{negative utilitarianism}.

The strongest criticism against utilitarianism is that such a theory is simply not moral.
The core of the criticism revolves around the idea that the principle of utility allows
people or institutions to violate minority rights. After all, the greatest good for the
greatest number implies that some people will necessarily be unhappy. Utilitarians
counter that an unhappy minority can have devastating effects on the majority, so that
their rights are not easily ignored.

Utilitarian theory offers alternative views on punishment, the legitimacy of
government, individual rights, and economic theory. The utilitarian rationale for
punishment is not \textit{retributive}; that is, the notion that criminals have to “pay” their debt
to society for the crime committed. Punishment is \textit{preventive}. It aims at preventing crime
by reforming the criminal, keeping criminals locked up, and deterring crimes through fear
of punishment. On matters of government authority, utilitarianism believes that it is
legitimate if it has the best consequences. Individual rights are also legitimate if they are
useful. Early utilitarians, David Ricardo among them, believed in \textit{laissez faire}, that is, an
economic system that is not regulated by the government. This idea is based on the
belief that utilitarianism is a factual account of how people indeed behave when
unrestricted. One utilitarian, Henry Sidgwick, asserted that utilitarianism is grounded in
common sense.

Utilitarian theory was much more than a theory during the most brutal stages of the
Industrial Revolution. Bentham and Mill were also actively involved in political reform.
They are among the first modern thinkers to propose the welfare state as the best form
of government. They did not think this thesis put them at odds with liberal democracy,
for even though utilitarians argue for the greatest liberty compatible with the equal
\textsuperscript{50} Mill, John Stuart. \textit{Utilitarianism}, Chapter 2.
liberty of others (based on the belief that each individual is the best judge of his own welfare), a democratic welfare state ensures a greater degree of happiness in general.

**Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857)**

The Enlightenment project of finding objective laws in human nature or society continues with the French philosopher Auguste Comte. The laws he thinks he has discovered have operated throughout the history of science. The *law of phases* posits that society has experienced three phases: the *theological*, the *metaphysical*, and the *scientific or positive* stages. Each of these phases is the basis for societal relations.

The theological phase refers to the period of pre-Enlightenment Europe when society was rooted in theology. The metaphysical phase begins after the French Revolution. After 1789, the notion of the universal rights of man was justified by grounding it on some natural law above and beyond the authority of any given ruler. The scientific phase comes into effect after the fall of Napoleon. During this phase, people try to solve societal issues without falling back on the supra-law of human rights or the will of God. That is, people realized that they had to posit or propose –the term positive comes from the verb to posit– solutions based on social facts and not some nonfactual account or basis.

The other law Comte claims to have discovered is the *encyclopedic law*, which in light of the positive stage, leads him to develop a classification of the sciences under two headings: inorganic and organic physics. The former includes chemistry, earth sciences, and chemistry; the latter biology and social physics, later renamed *sociology*. The view that a new science of the social was needed was prevalent within the historically minded 18th century, so that Comte’s notion is not completely original. However, his suggestion that this new science should include all the other sciences within it in order to give a coherent account of scientific fact is unique. It is based on the idea that there is relationship between theory, our understanding of the world, and social practices. Hence, Comte is generally considered the father of sociology.

The foundation of Comte’s philosophy is the fact. All obscure notions not based on facts must be eliminated. Nevertheless, if “it is true that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless; we could not retain them: for the most part we could not even perceive them.” The new science of sociology is the umbrella theory that allows us to make sense of the fact.

Comte coined the term sociology by joining the word *socius* (Latin for friend) with the word *logos*. Thus, there is an ethical dimension in his thought too. In fact, he also coined the term altruism, meaning the moral obligation to serve others and place their interests over our own. He disagreed with the liberal view of individual rights, since it was not consistent with altruism.
Comte had other notions which are extremely odd. His philosophy was initially ignored because of them. However, Comte’s emphasis on fact and the use of mathematics as a tool for analysis gave rise to a broad school called Positivism. Fact and theory is the legacy of this French philosopher. Despite the ever increasing influence of science, not all philosophers believed that the human condition could be reduced to scientific facts.

Existentialism

The very term existentialism is controversial. In its most specific use, it refers to the philosophy of the twentieth century French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre who used it to self-designate his own thought. However, Sartre himself thought his thinking developed the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in Being and Time. Heidegger, a twentieth century German philosopher, in turn thought his work was a further development of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. However, Heidegger did not consider himself an existentialist philosopher. Existentialism is another historical category of philosophy, such as empiricism, rationalism, realism, or idealism. As such, it is defined by some common threads, though considerable variations may exist from one philosopher to the next.

As the term itself indicates, existentialists are primarily concerned with existence – not existence at large but with human existence. One of its fundamental ideas is that the “old” categories used in philosophy to give human existence meaning are no longer useful. Modern science is of no use either, as human existence cannot be reduced to facts. Husserl’s observation that “only facts can follow from facts” exemplifies this belief. Hence, the categories of “human essence,” “individuality,” “body-mind,” or any other category drawn from traditional philosophy cannot help understand what it means to be myself. The common themes/concepts of existentialism are authenticity, alienation, the absurd, nothingness, boredom, and angst.

So-called existentialist philosophy aims at avoiding the overly rigorous approach of academic philosophy. The reaction against the old categories of philosophy is extended to the exercise of philosophy as a whole; that is, the adoption of new categories also means that philosophy has to be practiced in a completely different way. The dry ruminations of traditional philosophy have to be replaced with a more passionate quest for what it means to exist. We will begin this overview with two philosophers who lived before the term was coined, but that are often viewed as the forefathers of existential thought, Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard tries to make sense of individual existence through a new Christian perspective; Nietzsche would do so from the perspective of God’s death.
Søren Kierkegaard (1814 – 1855)

In Kierkegaard’s view, the “single individual” has remained invisible to philosophy; that is, philosophy has always spoken of the individual in universal terms. Even the atomistic individual of the liberal tradition views each and every individual as possessing universal traits. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard uses Hegel as the model of the traditional philosophical outlook of the individual. Hegel believes human actions become meaningful when they are raised to the level of universality. By sublating my desires to the moral law, I lose my individuality, but my actions become understandable since they are now done under a norm. From a Christian perspective, following God’s will gives meaning to my whole existence, but here too I lose my individuality since the law is universal. Kierkegaard uses the example of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to sharpen the problem of the single individual.

Such a sacrifice contradicts the ethical law, yet Kierkegaard believes that Abraham’s life is made meaningful by his trial. God’s command is not a universal command, but one meant only for Abraham. His life is made meaningful because through faith the “single individual is higher than the universal.” At this point we can see the philosophical problem involved: if my life is meaningful when it is not governed by some universal standard of morality, by what standard is it then ruled?

The answer is that “subjectivity is truth.” Abraham has no reason to believe that the command to sacrifice Isaac comes from God; it would be absurd. Abraham’s only justification for believing it is a command from God is his own passionate faith. Rationally speaking, any leap of faith is absurd, but this is the universal perspective speaking, not subjectivity. The subjectivity of truth lies in Abraham’s embracing the paradox (God’s command) in his individual being and not from the perspective of universal knowledge. Subjectivity does not seek to translate the singularity of my life into something universal, for being is a matter of being a single individual.

The opposite of truth is the crowd, that is, public opinion. Conformity to public opinion is “untruth,” because it tries to tell the individual what he or she should be, effectively relieving the individual from being himself. To those who think his conception of subjective truth is mistaken, Kierkegaard responds that the objective truths of science or traditional philosophy belong to the crowd. Truth is not meaningful because it is established objectively, but because it is “passionately” interiorized in its uncertainty. Existence means to be confronted with the question of meaning.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)

Europe, circa 1865. European scholarship in the shape of science and historical Biblical interpretation has led many to believe God is a cultural creation. The Enlightenment project has overcome the brief period of Romanticism and continued its assault on
superstition. Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859) has had a devastating effect. God is dead. What is man to do now that there is no objective force to guide him?

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!”— As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? — Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes.

“Whither is God?” he cried. “I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I! All of us are his murderers! But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? And backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we not hear anything as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition?—Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives,—who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed,—and whoever is born after us, for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto!”— Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners: they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern to the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves!”

This passage contains the seed of Nietzsche’s mature thought, namely that it takes a very special kind of man to overcome the demise of God, and that he has yet to appear. Nietzsche considered himself the physician Europe, as opposed to the metaphysician. European society suffered from a grave disease: nihilism, the belief that life has no intrinsic meaning. European man is “straying as through an infinite nothing?” He has “unchained” himself from “the sun” and knows not what to do. Nietzsche argues that the special man who can give meaning to his life without the need of an external force is the overman. You might be thinking that in eighteenth century Europe there were, as there are now, plenty of believers in God, particularly Christians. However, Nietzsche believes that Christianity is also nihilistic.

---

Nietzsche argues that Christianity denies life on earth, and since there is no afterlife, it thereby abolishes any meaning our life has, thus, leading to nihilism. In *Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, he draws a picture of our place in the universe:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of “world history”—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it.

It is hopeless then to look for meaning beyond our human existence. Christianity does this and more. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Judeo-Christian morality is historically analyzed. Nietzsche believes it arose as an expression of the resentiment of the weak against the power of the strong. Since the weak cannot be strong, the only way they can give themselves value is by inverting the scale of values so that what is powerful is evil and what is weak is good. This strategy led to the internalization of a new set of values, those of the weak, in the form of conscience. Nietzsche believes that it has made man a “sick” animal whose will to power is in conflict with its own vital instincts. Just as Kierkegaard thinks the “the crowd is untruth,” Nietzsche believes that European man is nothing but a herd animal who thinks he is free, when in fact he is nothing more than a tamed animal who obeys universal standards of morality, that is conscience. Again, it takes a special man to leave the “warmth of the herd.”

Nietzsche’s philosophy is certainly atheist, yet a common misconception is that it is also nihilist. A nihilist claims that there is no meaning to life, something he in fact agrees with. Yet Nietzsche contends that we can create a meaning for ourselves, since the sick animal is “pregnant with future.” In his historical account of European thought, he argues that Christianity’s insistence on truth-telling has rubbed off on science, which in turn now denies the existence of God, thereby undermining the “highest values” of European society. This will to truth is destroying the very foundation that wills it. It is in this context that the “God is dead” quote leads man to fall back on himself, unchaining himself from the tutelage of a Christian God whose values are the source of human illness: we “must become gods.”

The most basic power of any god is creation, and Nietzsche believes that is what we must do. Nietzsche is not egalitarian: his philosophy is unabashedly aristocratic in the original Greek meaning of the word. In his view, strength, both physical and mental, is excellence. The new age that is dawning on Europe is meant for the strong; the weak will necessarily become and/or remain nihilistic. The overman is the creator who transvalues his values by establishing a new “order of rank.” The overman teaches “the meaning of the earth” and does not “despise the body.” He does not need to justify his values by grounding them on the otherworldly. He is the will to power, that is, the will to exercise
our most basic instincts. He will come after the “last man” and will be “beyond good and evil.”

Human existence gives rise to the philosophical problem of moral autonomy (viewed as the Kantian obedience to the universal moral law) and a creative autonomy that is “beyond good and evil.” How do we know, though, that my creative autonomy is making my life meaningful? It is clear from what we have said that the standard for judging my own life resides in me; otherwise, I would go back to being a herd animal whose creative impulses are judged by some external standard. Nietzsche is in a tenuous position here. He cannot offer a standard for all human beings.

Nietzsche speaks metaphorically when he refers to this standard. He uses terms such as “health”, “strength,” and “meaning of the earth.” His clearest elaboration comes in the Gay Science, where he offers a standard appropriately singular. Our life is a work of art which cannot be judged by some universal standard, for it is internal to the work. Hence, a singular human life can only be judged from the inside from an internal, aesthetic perspective.

Nature does not care about us, nor do we have any special place in it. Man must constantly lie to himself to keep this fact hidden from him. Christianity was one such lie. We must create our own lies, our own representation of the world, to be able to live. Nietzsche uses many metaphors to explain his thought. In this case he uses the camel, the lion and the child to illustrate his point. For the first fifteen or so years of our lives we are saddled by the heavy burden of morality and conscience. We are like camels. As we reach adulthood, we rebel against this burden. We are like lions. Only the overman can become a true creator, that is, a child. Notice that children create their own games and give meaning and rules to their characters or toys. If we do not become child-like, the angst of nihilism may lead us to suicide. In Steppenwolf, Hermann Hesse’s main character, Harry Haller carries a razor blade for most of the novel. His thoughts are eminently suicidal, yet he senses he is pregnant with future. At the end of the book, after Harry understands that he must create his own meaning to life, he reaches into his pocket and finds not the razor blade but some game pieces. Creating one’s own values is only for strong, healthy individuals who will become the greatest deed and will thus belong to a “higher history.”

Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976)

Heidegger did not consider himself an existentialist but rather a phenomenologist who extended Husserl’s philosophy. Phenomenology and existentialism are distinct in several ways; however, they are both philosophies of subjectivity. Husserl believed that the history of philosophy was a movement away from objectivity and towards subjectivity. Somewhat immodestly, he claimed that such a historical trend culminated in his own philosophy. Heidegger agreed with Husserl’s historical analysis, but insisted it was his philosophy the marked the culmination of the process begun in ancient Greece by the Sophists.
“Phenomenology studies structures of conscious experience as experienced from the first-person point of view, along with relevant conditions of experience. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, the way it is directed through its content or meaning toward a certain object in the world.”⁵² A conscious experience is one a person, (the I) is aware of. By reflecting on my conscious experience I become aware of a lived experience as intentional. Husserl calls the ideal content of the object of awareness noema and the intentional process of consciousness noesis. In short, the noema is the object of noesis.

Husserl’s phenomenology integrates an analytic psychology, which describes and analyzes acts of consciousness, with a logical semantics or logic of meaning which describes and analyzes the contents of consciousness, such as ideas, concepts, images, and propositions. These contents may be shared with others by different acts of consciousness and become objective, ideal meanings. Husserl spent his whole life investigating how to carry out the study of conscious experience. He experimented with a Cartesian method of “bracketing” off our beliefs that come from our “natural attitude,” that is, our belief that there is a world and an I. He concluded that this method was inadequate. He then tried a historical approach which also proved unsatisfactory. Toward the end of his life, he thought he had found the right method, one that allowed the phenomenologist to understand the “essence of consciousness” as the subjective meaning we give to the world as the horizon of meaning. Months before his death, Husserl mused: “I didn’t know dying would be so difficult... Precisely now, when I have found my own path, precisely now I must interrupt my work and leave the task unfinished.”

Heidegger would continue the task at hand but following a different path. In Being and Time, he argues that phenomenology is a “fundamental ontology” that must distinguish beings from their being. The best way to study the nature of being is to examine our own existence, or Dasein, the being of which any being is constituted. Dasein is best understood in its contextual relations to things in the world, and the way we relate to these things is in our practical activities. Time and Being is an existential interpretation of our modes of being, including our being-toward-death. Existence for Heidegger is historical in the sense that my “selfhood has a peculiar temporal structure that is the origin of that ‘history’ which subsequently comes to be narrated in terms of a series of events.” Being in time is a unified narrative structure in which the future recollects the past in order to give meaning to the present. Acting does not take place in time, but rather “provides the condition for linear time.” An authentic life is “one in which the projects that give shape to existence are ones to which I commit myself in light of this history.”⁵³

Existence has a social and political dimension since existence is always being-with-others. My desire for authenticity stems from my feeling of alienation and anxiety caused by the normative claims of everyday existence. However, I can only understand myself in

terms of the heritage I belong to along with its norms. Thus authentic choice is circumscribed by a kind of historical “fate,” that is, the peculiar social circumstances in which I live. Being-with-others also means that I always act with others within a community which itself creates a “destiny.” Not everything is possible: my projects are part of a co-history. Any phenomenological investigation then must bear in mind these contextual elements. Heidegger’s philosophy lost favor after he joined the Nazi party during Hitler’s regime. Nevertheless, in following his philosophy, his choice can only be understood within the twin notions of fate and destiny.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980)

Sartre starts out his career with his own interpretation of Husserl. Acts of consciousness by which we assign meaning to objects are analyzed to seek their essential structure. As with Husserl, the basic idea is that consciousness is intentional. However, whereas Husserl analyzes consciousness to bring out what is essential in its “fluid unclarity,” Sartre does not believe that the analysis will find anything immutable and immanent in the phenomena. There is an essence in the fluidity of experience, but it is not prior to the experience itself.

In a Sketch for a Theory of Emotions, Sartre argues that the essence of an emotional state is not an immanent characteristic of our minds, but rather a transfiguration of the individual’s perspective of the world. With this view in mind, Sartre proposes a theory of the ego that goes against the Cartesian conception. In Descartes philosophy, self-consciousness is the consciousness that the ego has of itself. Hence, the ego exists prior to consciousness. Sartre’s more Humean view is that ego is a unity produced by consciousness and not its basis. A phenomenology of conscious experience thus seeks to describe and analyze the fluid nature of subjective experience.

Sartre philosophy is ultimately concerned with ethics and particularly with the notion of freedom. All ethical accounts must be cleared of an anthropology that views the ego as pre-existing. Hence, a conscious act is always spontaneous; that is, it does not derive from some kind of immutable human nature based on a pre-existing ego.

Sartre’s existential philosophy is based on his account of the ego. The dictum of his brand of existentialism is “existence precedes essence.” Individual human existence precedes its essence. This kind of freedom makes existence exceedingly problematic, as Nietzsche had already noticed.

One of Sartre’s most original contributions is his notion of nothingness and its relation to being. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre sets out to understand our power to negate. His conclusion is that the power of negation is a feature of our consciousness. His examination of the phenomenon of questioning brings out the nature of nothingness. When I ask a question, I take into consideration a variety of answers that fluctuate between the positive and the negative. This is what Sartre calls “fluctuating between being and nothingness.” In order to do so, the questioner must detach himself from all
deterministic constraints; that is, thinking of nothingness demands escaping the chains of causality. The human possibility to escape causality is what makes us free: “the name [of] this possibility which every human being has to secret a nothingness which isolates it... is freedom.” Negation reveals our freedom.

The above considerations lead Sartre to posit man’s unlimited freedom. This does not mean that man can do anything, but rather that we must always do something. Man is “condemned to be free” by the very possibility of negation. Choosing to do nothing is choosing nonetheless. Sartre’s evidence of freedom is our fear and anxiety.

Knowing we are irremediably free can be a source of fear. It is in fact easier to believe that freedom requires following some external will and not my own, but once we know that this external will is nothing more than a culturally and historically conditioned human construction, the fear of leading a meaningless life is renewed.

That human beings do not live in isolation is a given, but how do we know other minds exist. Sartre analysis of the “Look” reveals how we come to know and take into consideration other-beings. When somebody looks at me I become aware that am the object of another person’s consciousness, which naturally presupposes his existence. Interestingly, this very fact alienates me from myself, since who I am in an objective sense is determined by the Other. However I cannot disengage myself from the world, for all things have reasons for being only if I experience them. Anxiety, however, makes me view the world in a different way; it makes me become disengaged from the world. As such, things lose their meaning and become just names. Under the grip of anxiety, the world becomes absurd. In his novel Nausea, Roquentin, the protagonist, is overcome by the nausea of alienation. We cannot avoid fear and anxiety, but we can lead an authentic life, one that not only allows me to recover my singularity lost in the alienation of the crowd, but also keeps me tied to the my relation to the Other.

Analytic Philosophy

Analytic philosophy began during the second half of the 1800’s. It began as a concern with the foundations of mathematics which in turn led some mathematicians toward logic. Some of these mathematicians concluded that mathematics was ultimately based on logic, although not Aristotle’s. This assumption led them to formulate a new kind of logic known as predicate logic. It was natural that predicate logic generated an interested in language, particularly its inability to express concepts clearly; thus, these very same mathematicians initiated the branch of philosophy known as philosophy of language. Their mathematical inclinations led them to formulate formal languages that were axiomatic. The first of these mathematician-philosophers was Gottlob Frege.

---

54 Sartre, Jean-Paul. Being and Nothingness, pp. 24-25.
An Introduction to Modern and Modern Philosophy

One of the advantages mathematical language has over natural languages is its unambiguous script or writing, which is also international. In his *Begriffsschrift* (literally concept script) of 1879, Frege presents a formal logical language based on the language of arithmetic. Aristotle’s subject-predicate logic is replaced with a logic based on function and argument.

Frege seeks to formulate a logical language based on the language of arithmetic. He replaces the subject-predicate logic analysis of Aristotle with a more mathematical one of function and argument. For instance, the equation \( f(x) = x^2 + 1 \) states that \( f \) is a function that takes \( x \) as argument and yields as value the result of multiplying \( x \) by itself and adding one. Frege extends the notion of function and argument beyond arithmetic and into language by defining a concept as a function with a truth value of either true or false as its value for any object as argument. Take the concept being woman and suppose \( W(\ ) \) stands or symbolizes this concept. Let “a” be a constant for Virginia Woolf; let “b” stand for the constant David Hume. \( W(\ ) \) has the value of true for any argument that is woman and false for anything other than woman. Frege says that an object for which a concept has the value of true “falls under” the concept. Hence, Virginia Woolf “falls under” the concept woman. As such, \( W(a) \) has the value of true while \( W(b) \) has the value of false. Frege is the first to conceive of logic as axiomatic. His logic distinguishes axioms from the inference rules used to derive all other logical truths. Thus, it is possible to derive a great many logical truths from a limited number of fixed axioms and explicit rules of inference. Since Frege thought mathematics was based on logic, all the truths of arithmetic should in principle be derived this very way.

Frege expresses his concerns with language in a 1918 entitled *Thought*:

> I am not here in the happy position of a mineralogist who shows his audience a rock-crystal: I cannot put a thought in the hands of my readers with the request that they should examine it from all sides. Something in itself not perceptible by sense, the thought is presented to the reader – and I must be content with that – wrapped up in a perceptible linguistic form. The pictorial aspect of language presents difficulties. The sensible always breaks in and makes expressions pictorial and so improper. So one fights against language, and I am compelled to occupy myself with language although it is not my proper concern here. I hope I have succeeded in making clear to my readers what I want to call "thought."  


Philosophers had known for centuries that the relationship between language and thought was problematic. Thought, as Frege implies, is not a physical or sensible object one can observe, yet the best way we can represent it is through language, a sensible object in itself. Even though language seeks to express our thoughts, it doesn’t always do it in the clearest fashion. Natural languages in particular can be obscure and ambiguous. It has “logical imperfections” that cause confusion. Frege believed that thought has a logical structure which natural languages cannot capture. The solution, then, is to devise an artificial language which mirrors that structure and avoids the ambiguity of natural languages by making every word or complex expression stand for one object, concept or relation.
Frege suggests three fundamental principles for any such investigation: 1) to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective; 2) to ask after the meaning of a word only in the context of a sentence, not in isolation; and 3) to keep in mind the distinction between concept and object. Another contribution is the distinction between sense and reference.

An expression is said to express its sense and denote its reference. Frege’s own example is Venus. We sometimes refer to Venus as the morning star and sometimes as the evening star. In Frege’s terminology both “the morning star” and “the evening star” denote the planet Venus, but have two different senses. These are Frege’s major contributions.

1. Function-argument analysis of the proposition;
2. Distinction between the sense and reference of a proper name;
3. Advocacy of a mediated reference theory;
4. Distinction between concept and object;
5. Advancement of the context principle;
6. Formulation of the principle of compositionality.

Frege’s thought was made known beyond the German speaking world by a British philosopher who would try to create a formal language free of obscurity, Bertrand Russell.

Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970)

Hegel’s idealist philosophy had taken hold in Great Britain by way of Bradley. Russell gives the long British empiricist tradition new vigor and a new outlook. As one of the founders of analytic philosophy, he sought to eliminate confusion and meaningless assertions in philosophy. In fact, he conceived the philosopher’s task as mainly that. Logic and science were the tools philosophy needed to rely on to carry it out. Russell, prefiguring the general trend of twentieth century philosophy, thought metaphysical excess played a large part in causing philosophical confusion. The ambiguity of natural languages and the excess of metaphysics could both be eliminated by a logical analysis that wrought precision and distinguished fact from fiction. Russell calls this new philosophy logical atomism.

The method of logical atomism is based on an empiricist ontology that makes use of Ockham’s razor. The world is made up of logically independent facts which we come to know by direct experience or description. Russell proposes a language that could mirror the world isomorphically, that is, a language consisting of terms of atomic propositions and their truth functional compounds which reflect the facts the world is made up of. Any statement which cannot be reduced to these atomic propositions is neither true nor false, but simply meaningless. More specifically, then, the task of philosophy consists in analyzing statements into their simplest components until we reach the ultimate atomic
fact. This allows us to clearly determine what truly constitutes a philosophical problem and what does not.

Russell’s most important works was the *Principia Mathematica*, a book on logic and mathematics. The *Principia* presents a consistent system free of paradoxes. Frege had tried formulating such a system but fell prey to an inconsistency known as Russell’s Paradox. The paradox deals with sets and may be expressed as a question: Is the set of all sets a set of the set of all sets? The answer can only no, since A (the set of all sets) is a member of A if and only if A is not a member of A. However, doesn’t the set of all sets contain all possible sets? Russell would find a solution to the problem, but his own system had a flaw based on Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem. The theorem essentially states that in any consistent system of primitive recursive arithmetic cannot determine that every proposition formulated within that system was decidable; that is, it cannot decide whether that proposition or its negation was provable within the system.

Russell taught at Cambridge where he had a brilliant young pupil by the name of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Russell saw him not only as his successor, but as the example of what all philosophers should be. Wittgenstein would go on to become arguably the most important philosopher of the twentieth century, though he never fulfilled Russell’s dream.

**Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951)**

“Well God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15 train.” Maynard Keynes, one of the most influential economists of the twentieth century, is referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is 1929 and about seven years have passed since he published a book he thought had solved all the problems of philosophy, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It soon became a classic, and his philosophy attracted innumerable followers.

Wittgenstein was a unique individual who was born into one of the wealthiest families in Europe. When World War I broke out, he enlisted and asked to be stationed in the front line. The *Tractatus* was written during the war. It was published in 1921 and Wittgenstein decided he had nothing more to do in philosophy. He gave away his fortune and became a school teacher in rural Austria and later a gardener in a monastery, before his hailed return to England in 1929. However, he soon began to have doubts about his own philosophy. He decided to write another book, though he died before he could finish it. The *Philosophical Investigations* also became a classic. Let’s begin with the *Tractatus*.

Ray Monk describes the *Tractatus* “as one of the most enigmatic pieces of philosophy ever published: too mystical for logicians, too technical for mystics, too poetic for philosophers, and too philosophical for poets, it is a work that makes extraordinarily few concessions to the reader and seems consciously designed to elude comprehension.”

1. The world is everything that is the case.

1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts.

1.12 For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case.

1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.

1.2 The world divides into facts.

1.21 Anyone can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remains the same.

The first thing that jumps out at the reader of the *Tractatus* is the numbering system. Wittgenstein thought it was absolutely necessary for it to make sense. He explains it in a footnote: “The decimal numbers assigned to the individual propositions indicate the logical importance of the propositions, the stress laid on them in my exposition. The propositions \( n.1, n.2, n.3, \text{ etc.} \), are comments on proposition no. \( n \); the propositions \( n.m1, n.m2, \text{ etc.} \), are comments on propositions no. \( n.m \); and so on.” Thus, the whole book can be viewed as consisting of seven propositions and comments on them. The seven propositions are:

1. The world is all that is the case.
2. What is the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs.
3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.
4. A thought is a proposition with a sense.
5. A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.)
6. The general form of a truth-function is \([\vec{x}, N(\vec{x})] \). This is the general form of a proposition.
7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Proposition number one tells us what the world is, number two what a fact is, number three what a thought is, and numbers four through six what a proposition is. Number seven, the only proposition without any commentary, is a prescription which the preface explains is the “whole meaning” of the book. This is Wittgenstein’s short preface.

Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who himself has already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts. So it is not a
textbook. Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it.

The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on a misunderstanding of the logic of our language. Its whole meaning can be summed up somewhat as follows: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

How far my efforts agree with those of other philosophers I will not decide. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in points of detail; and therefore I give no sources, because it is indifferent to me whether what I have thought has already been thought before me by another.

I will only mention that I am indebted to Frege’s great works and of the writings of my friend Mr. Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation of my thoughts.

If this work has a value it consists in two things: First that in it thoughts are expressed, and this value will be the greater the better the thoughts are expressed. The more the nail has been hit on the head the greater will be its value. – Here I am conscious that I have fallen far short of what is possible. Simply because my powers are insufficient for the accomplishment of the task. – May others come and do it better.

On the other hand the truth of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved. And if I am not mistaken in this belief, then the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.

The preface explicitly states that the whole meaning of the book is understood as setting the limits of language, which in turn sets the limits of our thinking. There are things we can talk about clearly and things we cannot, in fact, should not talk about since doing so leads to nonsense. We must remain silent on these topics, which Wittgenstein believes include ethics, the meaning of life, religion, aesthetics, logic and philosophy. Now, what cannot be said cannot be said but only shown. In other words, the meaning of life, what is right or wrong, whether there is a God or not, etc. show themselves to us and do not need to be expressed through language. Many commentators have drawn an analogy between this thesis and the silence of Zen Buddhism.

Zen Buddhism believes thought is essentially paradoxical. Many of the exercises practiced in Zen Buddhism are meant to eliminate thought in order to see how things really are. Zen Buddhists have a great number of exemplifying paradoxes that show how
this is so. For instance: A young man is searching for The Great Master so he can answer the question that torments him. He finally finds him on the side of a mountain hanging by his teeth from the branch of a tree (The Great Master has no arms). He crawls toward the edge of the mountain and asks, “Master, what is the meaning of life?” If the young man were more perceptive, he would see the meaning of life that is being shown to him. The question that torments him does so not because it is a big question, but because it becomes complicated once it is expressed. Wittgenstein believed that all of the problems of philosophy were the same. The *Tractatus* tries to show how nonsensical philosophy is when it is given expression through language. The biggest problem he has, though, is that he is telling the reader all this. Hence, many commentators believe the *Tractatus* is contradictory. However, Wittgenstein admits his book is nonsensical, so what is his point? Thousands of pages have been written on this matter, and there is no general consensus. Let’s leave this paradox aside and try to understand the main points of the book.

The world, Wittgenstein tells us, is not made up of objects or things but of facts. In other words, if you divide the world into parts, these parts are facts. You might be thinking that facts are made up of objects. True, but objects by themselves are meaningless. What makes an object meaningful is its being part of a fact about the world. For example, an orange means nothing unless a fact can be stated about it, such as, “Oranges are sweet.” Sweet is meaningless unless it is contextualized in a fact. This can be extended to language itself by saying that a word is meaningless unless it is part of a proposition. Hence, the world is made up of facts and language that wants to reflect this is made up of propositions. What then is thought?

Wittgenstein believes thought is a mental picture that mirrors a state of affairs in the world. Take a look at this picture.

The picture represents objects, yet these objects mean nothing unless they are facts that form a state of affairs in the world. A thought is a “logical picture” that mirrors the logical form a possible state of affairs. Thought is the expressed through propositions; thus, a clear language should clearly mirror the world.

A proposition is the expression of thought “that can be perceived by the senses.” A proposition is a “sign” that projects a state of affairs and expresses a thought. A proposition is meaningful if and only if it expresses a factual state of affairs in the world. Propositions can project and express thoughts and thoughts can mirror facts because
they all share in the same logical form. Now, the “totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of natural science),” and any proposition that lies outside the realm of natural science is not false, but meaningless, for it does not project or express a possible state of affairs that is factual. Philosophy is not a natural science, but it does have a role: “Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.” Because it is not “a body of doctrines but an activity,” the work of philosophy “does not result in ‘philosophical propositions,’ but rather in the clarification of propositions.”

One of the most interesting statements in the Tractatus is the contention that the only necessity that exists is logical necessity. The example Wittgenstein offers is the existence of a given color at a given place and time, as when we see a blue ball on the table at seven o’clock. It is impossible that that very same object, at that very place, and at that very time can be another color; thus, it is of necessity blue. It is relatively easy to understand why it is physically necessary for the ball to be blue and on the table at seven o’clock, yet why is all this logically necessary? Wittgenstein’s account in the Tractatus is unconvincing, and yet it is founded on the cornerstone of its theory. This cornerstone is logical form – which includes the notion of logical necessity. One of Wittgenstein’s students, Frank Ramsey, visited Wittgenstein in Vienna in 1923. Wittgenstein believed Ramsey was perhaps the one person who could understand the Tractatus. Ramsey understood it well enough to point out the difficulty of logical necessity. Ramsey’s astute analysis made Wittgenstein return to Cambridge and philosophy. As a result, he embarked on a restatement of his views which would lead to the Philosophical Investigations. He had not, after all, settled all the problems of philosophy.

Soon after his return to Cambridge, Wittgenstein became convinced that he must give up his conception of logical form. In fact, he gave up the idea that a formal language is the only medium for expressing ourselves with absolute clarity:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. –We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!

A new perspective is required –one that does not make use of the requirement: “The preconceived idea of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination around.” Wittgenstein’s new perspective is a pre-philosophical picture of language. Instead of trying to putting forward a theory of the “general form of the proposition,” he is now interested in “the kind of understanding that consists in seeing connections.” He does so by understanding how these connections are made at the most primitive level of language. Wittgenstein uses the notion of language games to show how this is carried out:

---

57 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.11 – 4.112.
I shall in the future again and again draw attention to what I shall call language games. These are the ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. Language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages. If I want to study the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought.60

Following this line of investigation is difficult because philosophers, in line with science, crave generality. The Tractatus is an example of how the “craving for generality” leads to philosophical confusion. The notion of language games allows us to view a diversity of connections at the most primitive level of language. The very fact that the diversity with which words and language as a whole is used should keep the philosopher from formulating generalizations, away from theory.

Wittgenstein viewed his new philosophical outlook as a therapy that would cure philosophical thinking from its illnesses. The main illness was its desire to imitate science or be rigorously scientific. However, science is but one of the language games we can play, along with mathematics, courting someone, selling a product, etc. Each of these games may use a word such as one, but the meaning of one cannot be understood to be universal to all of these situations. The different meanings of the word one share a “family resemblance,” but they are not identical. The meanings of words is not, then, something you can correlate to an object in such a way that everybody always knows what it means, but rather, the specific situation or game determines what it means. Thus, formal languages are an attempt at generalizing what cannot be generalized, namely natural languages.

In a remarkable life, Ludwig Wittgenstein was able to influence two separate, some would say contradictory, philosophical tendencies: the analytic school that seeks to reduce thought and language to logic, and the natural language school that seeks to understand the use we make of our language in everyday life.

Other Twentieth Century Tendencies

Wittgenstein influenced a group of academics in Austria known as the Circle of Vienna. The Logical Positivists, as they were also known, interpreted the Tractatus as the proper way of conducting philosophy. They were particularly influenced by proposition 4.11, that is, truth is what science tells us it is. Logical positivism extends the anti-metaphysical

tendency of late 19th and early 20th century philosophy, a tendency that is still going strong to this day.

Meanwhile, the Marxist tradition continued in the Frankfurt School in Germany. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer used Marx’s philosophy to uncover the pervading influence of capitalism on politics, science, art, and culture in general. Their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, written during the horrors of World War II, asserts that the obsession with reason is leading the world on a path of destruction. The rationalization of the world and man leads to totalitarian regimes such as Hitler’s, Mussolini’s, and Stalin’s, all of which Adorno later calls “sad sciences.” The ideas contained in the *Dialectic* have led some philosophers to believe that World War II, and particularly the Holocaust, mark the end of the Modern period. Reason can no longer be viewed as intrinsically good. The Enlightenment project with its emphasis on reason as the source of progress and peace among human beings had been devalued by the work of Sigmund Freud and the horrors of two world wars. Science, the paramount of human reason, had been used to kill millions. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s words, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”

Postmodernism emerges from the ashes of World War I and II and clearly expresses its distrust at human reason by trying to uncover its rational façade. Postmodernism goes against the ideas of reason, objectivity, certainty, and cultural monism. In a sense, it is a projection of the existentialist insistence on the individual and the narratives he is informed by. As such, the origins of postmodernism reach back into the 19th century, although it is a distinctly twentieth century tendency. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard rank among the most important philosophers during the twentieth century. Derrida sought to deconstruct texts in order to uncover their real intentions. Foucault examines how power lies behind human reason and institutions. Lyotard examines universal knowledge in order to show it is ultimately based on the narrative a given period of time.

Not every philosopher agrees with the contentions of postmodernism. Jürgen Habermas, who studied under Adorno, presents a distinctly modernist ethical-political project based on the universality that underlies communication. Others have found a middle point more appealing. “Universalism” is still possible, but within a limited cultural scope. John Rawls’ *political liberalism* calls for a conception of justice that is based on the ideas of citizens who live in a democracy. His theory of justice is locally universal and not necessary; that is, if the ideas of the citizens who adopted the conception of justice change, then a new conception would have to be worked out.

A very important development in twentieth century philosophy is the feminist approach. Any reader of the history of philosophy immediately realizes that before the twentieth century 99.9% of all philosophers were men. Feminist philosophy extends the general theory of feminism to philosophy, namely, that centuries of male domination have made everything masculine. Philosophical concepts need to be revalued and

---

61. Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max. *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, p. 1
reformulated from a feminine perspective. A good example is the concept of justice which is ultimately derived from the paterfamilias’ black and white notion of right and wrong. Carol Gilligan has suggested the female psyche does not view social interaction as a matter of right and wrong but of responsibility and caring:

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the ‘real and recognizable trouble’ of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment. Women’s insistence on care is at first self-critical rather than self-protective, while men initially conceive obligation to others negatively in terms of noninterference. Development for both sexes would therefore seem to entail an integration of rights and responsibilities through the discovery of the complementarity of these disparate views. For women, the integration of rights and responsibilities takes place through an understanding of the psychological logic of relationships. This understanding tempers the self-destructive potential of a self-critical morality by asserting the need of all persons [including themselves] for care. For men, recognition through experience of the need for more active responsibility in taking care corrects the potential indifference of a morality of noninterference and turns attention from the logic to the consequences of choice. In the development of a post-conventional ethical understanding, women come to see the violence inherent in inequality, while men come to see the limitation of a conception of justice blinded to the differences in human life.62

Richard Rorty, a somewhat postmodernist philosopher, argues that philosophy has lost its traditional role as formulator and solver of the big questions. It should be content with becoming the handmaiden or assistant of literature. More than two millennia of philosophical thinking have shown that it is an ever evolving discipline; however, its critical nature has not faded. In fact, Rorty’s remark proves just how critical it can be – even of itself.

62 Gilligan, Carol. In a Different Voice, p. 34.