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Introduction

STEVEN NADLER

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represent an extraordinarly rich period for philosophy in Western Europe. This is due not only to the fortuitous appearance of individuals of great natural genius – Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, et al. – but also, in no small part, to a confluence of various historical, intellectual, spiritual and even material factors: the rise of the new modern science, with its devotion to clear and fruitful mechanistic explanations of natural phenomena, along with the development of sophisticated conceptions of experiment and theory and consequent reformulations of the canons of knowledge; the radical rethinking of the cosmos entailed by new developments and discoveries in particular sciences, especially physics and astronomy; the culture-shock generated by the relatively recent confrontation by the West with theretofore unknown civilizations half a world away; the proliferation of centers of learning and channels of communication; and, not the least, the Protestant Reformation of the previous century, combined with the reactionary forces of the counter-Reformation.

In addition to all of these factors, some of which existed in tension with each other, there are also the important changes that took place in the social context of philosophizing itself. During the Middle Ages, philosophizing took place in the arts faculties of the schools and colleges – where ethics, logic, metaphysics, and physics were taught – and in the theological faculties of the universities. It thus came under the direct and censorious scrutiny of the Church. By the seventeenth century, however, although it was still the case that anyone who would earn a living by doing philosophical thinking and writing had either to belong to a university faculty or to teach in a college, it had become more common to find original philosophical minds working outside the strictures of the university – i.e., ecclesiastic – framework. Newton, to be sure, did have a professorship at Cambridge; Berkeley was an Anglican bishop, and Arnauld and Malebranche were Catholic priests. But Spinoza was an excommunicated Jew; Leibniz was employed as a librarian, diplomatic adviser and historian to German dukes; and Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Hume and many others were what would today be called ''independent scholars.'' At the end of the sixteenth century, in other words, although there had already been a number of independent thinkers of great importance (such as Erasmus, Machiavelli and Pico della Mirandola), philosophy was still, for the most part, under the aegis of

ecclesiastics and their schools; by the end of the eighteenth century, it was a secular enterprise. Part of the reason for this may, in fact, have been that philosophers who sought to break out of the prevailing orthodoxy sought to create for themselves some space, and even institutions, for philosophizing outside of the universities.

On the other hand, I do not want to suggest that there is a radical discontinuity between early modern philosophy and what went before. The history of philosophy tends not to proceed by large-scale paradigm shifts. Descartes and his colleagues did indeed take themselves to be instigating a renewal of philosophy; but it is also the case that both the structure and the content of much of their philosophy has at least one foot in the scholastic mindset in which they were educated and against which they were reacting. They could not leave the influence and the material of the schools entirely behind, even if their intention was to move philosophy well beyond them.

What we tend to think of now as ''philosophy,'' a broad but relatively precise discipline distinct from what we call ''the sciences'' and ''religion'' and characterized by certain kinds of (apparently unresolvable) questions, would have struck an early modern thinker as unreasonably narrow. The term ''philosophy'' included in the seventeenth century a great deal more than it does today, including much of what we take to be the physical and biological sciences. The makeup of the world around us – both the terrestrial and celestial realms – was, in the early modern period, as much an object of the philosopher's attention as the logical structure of an argument, the conception of the good life and metaphysical questions about being. Natural science was, indeed, simply ''natural philosophy.'' Similarly, when studying the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we would do wrong to separate those figures who are properly ''philosophical'' from those who are ''theologians'' or ''political theorists'' or ''jurists.'' The study of early modern philosophy demands that we pay attention to a wide variety of questions and an expansive pantheon of thinkers: the traditional canonical figures (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume), to be sure, but also a large ''supporting cast,'' including Christian apologists, mechanistic chemists, Jansenist polemicists, political pamphleteers, country priests, rabbinical messianists, and intellectually gifted queens, princesses and noblewomen.

As the editor of this volume, I have tried to insure that the essays reflect these facts, and that the reader will get a reasonably fair sense of the richness and variety of philosophy in the period. Of course, not all of the philosophers discussed in the chapters that follow are of equal significance. As essential as it is to be ecumenical in deciding whom to include, it would be absurd to treat all figures and movements as being of the same importance. Thus, a number of thinkers are given essays of their own, some longer than others; other thinkers are incorporated into extended discussions of movements or context. Another editor might have done things differently in these regards; and a discussion of that question would be of great value in its own right.

Two particular questions about inclusion, however, do need to be addressed briefly here. Naturally, the division of the history of a field into distinct periods involves a great deal of arbitrariness. Why should the early modern period in

philosophy begin with Descartes and Bacon, for example, rather than with Erasmus and Montaigne? (How, in fact, are we supposed to separate ''early modern'' thought from that of the late Renaissance?) And why should it end just before Kant rather than, say, with Hegel? There are no answers to these questions that will satisfy everyone. Suffice it to say that at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and especially with Bacon and Descartes, certain questions and concerns come to the fore – a variety of issues that motivated the inquiries and debates that would characterize much philosophical thinking for the next two centuries. As for Kant, the only reasonable answer that comes to mind is that Kant's philosophy does indeed represent so much of a break from what went before that it seems more of a new beginning than the culmination of a preceding tradition.

Perhaps less arbitrary, and certainly – in terms of realistically containing the scope of this book – practically necessary, is the limitation of our geographical attention to Western Europe. In many respects, it is the Western European philosophers in the early modern period who set the agenda for philosophy today as it is practiced in much of the English-speaking world (and the French-, German-, Italian-, Spanish-, and Dutch-speaking worlds as well) – not only with regard to its aims and problems, but also in terms of method. Moreover, confining our attention to this part of the world in this particular time period, and starting and ending with these specific philosophers and movements, is also useful for allowing some kind of narrative unity – or, better, a series of narrative unities – to emerge from the essays. The history of philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe contains a number of very interesting stories, stories that readers will see develop not only in individual chapters, but especially as they carry on through a number of essays. Some of these are success stories; others are tales of failure. All of them are enlightening for what they tell us about the practice of philosophy not only in the period, but also today.

Steven Nadler