

LESSON 6

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

Introduction

St. Thomas Aquinas represents a group of theologians who lifted the lid too high on the Pandora's Box of Scientific Enquiry based on Aristotle. "The story of modern philosophy is a story of successive rebellions."¹ Writers of the Roman Catholic persuasion like Etienne Gilson "feel that ever since Thomas Aquinas modern thinking has been perverted and captured by false ideals."² But those philosophers who like to be recognized as belonging to the school of the "scientific method" affirm that medieval thought is characterized by stagnation and a worship of the ecclesiastical system. "Nothing distinguishes modern philosophy so much as its distrust of authority . . . The scientific spirit has come to make more and more headway in philosophy; change is welcomed rather than rejected; and the spirit of finality is not accepted."³

The influence of science upon the philosophy of religion began with mild and measured divergence in the seventeenth century. It has become increasingly radical and antagonistic as an atheistic humanism has invaded more and more of the thinking in the laboratories. One brilliant young scientist, who is a Christian by confession, recently told this writer that there probably was very little correlation between scientific truth and revealed religion. A study of "modern" philosophy, and especially that of the seventeenth century, is needed to see how such a statement is even possible for a real scientist.

The Rationalists

René Descartes (1596-1650)

René Descartes was the first of the great rationalist philosophers. He was a Frenchman contemporary with Charles I, Oliver Cromwell, Kepler, Galileo, Jansen, and Hugo Grotius. Descartes was seemingly anxious to establish the validity of human knowledge. He considered the proposition: can man really know anything for sure? Having been a mathematician⁴ trained by the Jesuits, he was aware of the relative and abstract nature of even an "exact" science like mathematics. Because of the lack of

¹Frederick Mayer, *A History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: American Book Company, 1951), p. 1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 3, 4.

⁴He invented analytical geometry and contributed to the basic understanding of musical theory. He also experimented with the science of optics.

One of the first great rationalist philosophers was

(René Descartes)

Descartes seemed anxious to establish the
_____ of human knowledge.

(validity)

agreement among the philosophers of his day, he decided to introduce the methodology of mathematics into philosophical thought. He thus became one of the important founders of modern epistemology.

Descartes decided to doubt everything that did not appear to be a clear and distinct idea. Such an idea he qualified as "self-evident." Other ideas were classified as (1) *innate*, (2) *adventitious* and (3) *factitious*. Innate ideas were any that could be thought of. Adventitious were the ideas that came from without. Factitious ideas are those one produces within his own mind. Descartes admired the tenets of Platonism, and the Socratic injunction "know thyself" fascinated him. He began to doubt everything he could possibly doubt about himself—even if he existed or not. "Though he might doubt nearly all else, Descartes could not reasonably doubt that he, who was thinking existed . . ."⁵ as a thinking being (*res cogitans*). His formula *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) was considered an "immediate intuition."⁶

From this initial self-evident idea, he sought to affirm the existence of God. "Descartes was interested in God not for his own sake, but for the world's."⁷ God was invoked to guarantee the validity of a man's thoughts. Therefore, Descartes used a variation of Anselm by assuming that if imperfect man could have an idea of a Perfect Being, "the very idea of a Perfect Being implied its existence."⁸ Now, since God is perfect He would not deceive the thinker. He would not allow anyone to believe his clear and distinct ideas were true, if they were not. Therefore, all logical deductions about reality are valid! Many philosophers have challenged this position.⁹

"But on the continent, Descartes set the trend. Rationalism dominated continental, especially German, philosophy almost to the end of the eighteenth century."¹⁰ It is not right to credit Descartes exclusively with the beginnings of "modern philosophy;" he owed a great debt to Anselm.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

Baruch Spinoza, who was born to Jewish parents in Amsterdam, grew to be one of the most controversial figures of his times. He was a Pantheist who arrived at his religious position by means of the rationalist methods very similar to those of Descartes. He was censored for his biblical criticism, but his pantheism was the reason for his expulsion from the synagogue. He concluded that he must *deny* the free will of man and that God could love men in a personal way. He affirmed that all true ideas would become self-evident if they were merely stated properly and well.

⁵Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1967), p. 45.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 52.

⁸Ibid., p. 51.

⁹Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer. They charge covert tautology—meaningless repetition in different words.

¹⁰Colin Brown, p. 53.

Descartes introduced the methodology of _____
_____ into _____ thought.

(mathematics, philosophical)

List four classes of ideas as listed by Descartes.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Descartes doubted everything about _____
that he could _____.

(himself, doubt)

Descartes sought to affirm the _____
of _____.

(existence, God)

Descartes owed a great debt to _____.

(Anselm)

Spinoza was a P _____. For this, he
was expelled from the _____.

(Pantheist, synagogue)

G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716)

G. W. Leibniz shares with Newton the honour of discovering infinitesimal calculus and did valuable work on symbolic logic.

Leibniz wrote *Monadology* (1714) which describes his unique philosophical position on *monads*. They are purported to be "simple substances" without parts and "without windows by which anything could come in or go out."¹¹ They are indivisible and ever active. Each *monad* is a mirror of all existence. The lowest *monad* is almost nothing while the highest in the scale is God. He used the ontological argument to arrive at the conclusion above.

Rationalism was the vehicle by which a Catholic almost became a Deist, a Jew became a Pantheist, and a Protestant produced a sort of impersonal scale of existence.

"Today rationalism is discredited."¹² It has been alleged that the god of rationalism was an hypothetical abstraction invented to make a system work.

Voluntarism (Pre-existentialism?)

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

Blaise Pascal was a mathematical giant, even in his early youth. He formulated important mathematical theories while yet in his teens. He lived in a rationalistic environment, but he chose faith over reason for the final authority. He joined the Jansenists at Port Royal where he lived an ascetic life.

Pascal wrote *Provincial Letters* (1656-1657) in which he rejected "probabilism"¹³—an opinion favouring liberty over strict law if the opinion is acceptable to judicious minds or is supported by sound authority. He rejected not only this but other Jesuit principles. "Pascal¹⁴ devoted a great deal of energy to rational argument" especially in his theological works. But he wrote: "What a vast distance there is between knowing God and loving him!"¹⁵ In Pascal's *Provincial Letters* we find three principles that limit his epistemology: "The senses, reason and faith, have each their separate objects, and their own degrees of certainty . . . Whatever the proposition . . . we must first determine its nature, to ascertain to which of those three principles it ought to be referred."¹⁶

Basic to Pascal's case for Christianity is his famous "Wager Argument." After admitting frankly that arguments for God's existence are invalid, he challenges his reader to

¹¹Ibid., p. 56.

¹²Ibid., p. 57.

¹³Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 134.

¹⁴Colin Brown, p. 60.

¹⁵From his *Pensees* quoted by Colin Brown, p. 60.

¹⁶David E. Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief*, Roger Hazelton, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 50.

G. W. Leibniz shared in the discovery of I _____
_____ C _____ .

(Infinitesimal Calculus)

Blaise Pascal also was a mathematical _____ .
(giant)

For his final authority, Pascal chose _____
over _____ .

(faith, reason)

Pascal's epistemology was limited by the
_____, _____ and
_____ .

(senses, reason, faith)

Pascal made the famous _____
_____ .

(Wager Argument)

"bet his life" on the fact that God is, and that Jesus of Nazareth has revealed Him to be what and Who He really is. Like Kierkegaard, Pascal challenges one to make "the leap of faith."¹⁷

He tries to explain his own personal experience with God after his conversion in November of 1654. This accounts for his choice of faith over reason because he, too, had "bet his life" on God.

Empiricism

Rationalism was a continental movement. Many philosophers today regard empiricism as the most significant among the philosophical trends of the seventeenth century and beyond. "Like rationalism the term denotes not so much a well-defined school of thought as a general line of approach."¹⁸ The rationalists made much of "self-evident" truths. The empiricists insisted that knowledge must be based upon experience—experience through the senses. "Statements (apart from those of pure logic) can be known to be true or false only by testing them in experience."¹⁹

John Locke (M.D.) (1632-1704)

John Locke is chiefly remembered for pioneering the empiricist epistemology. He read Descartes at Oxford, but he rejected rationalism's "self-evident" notions. He affirmed that the human mind was a *tabula rasa* (a blank tablet) which received all its impressions of knowledge from outside itself. What man knows are either *ideas* (impressions in the mind and what are called "sensible qualities," i.e., colours, temperatures or tastes) or the mind's own reflections on these things.

In 1690, after returning from political self-exile in Holland, Locke wrote *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this work he examined Descartes' doctrine of "innate ideas" and pointed out that such ideas, if they were truly innate, should be more or less universal. He concluded that there are no such ideas. He affirmed that ideas are *received* through sensation and reflection. The communication of ideas is realized through language, and Locke examined this communication in the essay. Language brought up the problem of *nominal* or *real* essences. Locke was "inclined towards *nominalism*."²⁰ Locke justified the acceptance of Christianity and the basis of fundamental reasonableness, and value in practical living.

Conclusion

Brilliant thinkers found themselves in a world of political, economic and social transition in the seventeenth

The rationalists made much of "_____"
_____ " truths.

Empiricists on the other hand insisted that _____
_____ must be based on
_____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

According to John Locke, the human mind is a
b_____ t_____.

(blank tablet)

Is the following statement true or false?

In contrast to Descartes John Locke concluded that
there is no such thing as "innate" ideas.

(true)

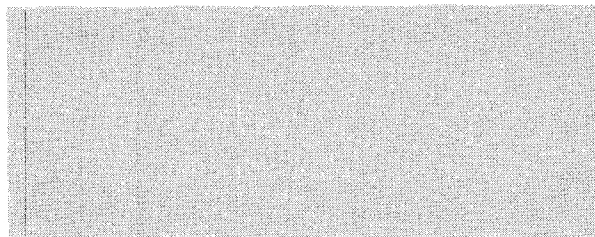
¹⁷Ibid., pp. 51-53.

¹⁸Colin Brown, p. 60.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 60, 61.

²⁰Albert E. Avey, p. 142.

century. The old medieval foundations and the stability of social and political life guaranteed by the Church were now non-existent. Above, we have seen incisive, and sometimes desperate, efforts made to lay hand on reality and truth. At the same time the divergent beliefs of these "legitimizers" account for the conflicts of philosophical and theological thought in the following centuries.



Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. Who was Rene Descartes?

2. Descartes classified ideas into four groups. Name them.

3. How did Descartes seek to prove the existence of God?

4. Identify Baruch Spinoza and G. W. Leibniz.

5. What did Pascal choose for his final authority?

6. What three principles limit Pascal's epistemology?

7. What was Pascal's famous "Wager Argument"?

8. Define rationalism; empiricism.

9. In contrast to rationalism's "self-evident" truths, what position did John Locke take?

10. What was John Locke's conclusion about "innate" ideas?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 48-60 in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. Discuss the problem of "self-evident truths" projected by the rationalists.
2. Explain the importance of "Cartesian Doubt" in rationalism on the Continent.
3. What was the most disastrous moment in European history according to William Temple? Elaborate.
4. How did Leibniz, Spinoza and Pascal differ from Descartes?
5. Outline Locke's empiricism.

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Discuss the reliability of the work on *Monadology*, 1714. What influence did Leibniz have on theologians such as A. H. Strong (*Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols.) and C. Wolff?
2. Explain the phrase *deus ex machina* and its importance to rationalistic theology.
3. Why is Pascal often included among the Existentialist philosophers (idea of the wager)? What of his "voluntarism"? (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, page 59.)

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the relation between faith and reason. Paradox?
2. Why is rationalism discredited today?
3. What is attractive about Spinoza's pantheism to J. A. T. Robinson and Paul Tillich? Discuss the nature of God.