Introduction to Modern Philosophy

PHIL 126, YALE UNIVERSITY, SPRING 2019

These are lecture notes for PHIL 126b, "Introduction to Modern Philosophy," taught by Michael Della Rocca at Yale University during the spring of 2019. These notes are not official, and have not been proofread by the instructor for the course. They live in my lecture notes respository at

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1 January 14, 2019

"Do you know what Pop-tarts are?"

Michael Della Rocca

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This class will cover 17^{th} and 18^{th} century philosophers, including René Descartes, Nicolas Malebranch, Benedict de Spinoza, Anne Conway, Gottfried Leibniz, Emilie du Châtelet, John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. These philosophers defined the themes and methods of modern philosophy today. They tried to understand what the world is like and what our place in it is.

Philosophy is not teleological; older philosophers may have a *better understanding* of some ideas than contemporary philosophers do — this is one reason why we study older ideas. There is also a rich tradition of dialogue with older philosophers. Much of philosopher is thinkers responding to and criticizing older philosophers.

Problem 1.1 (The Mind-Body Problem)**.** What is the relation, if any, between the physical body and the mind? How do mental states relate to bodily states? Are the two distinct or the same? Is the mind destroyed if the body is destroyed? Are we the same person we were in previous years? How to the mind and body interact?

Definition (Naturalism)**.** The belief that everything plays by the same rules, and that the laws of nature apply to everything (including immaterial things, like the mind). Advocated by Spinoza and Hume. *Naturalism*

Problem 1.2 (Freedom)**.** Does free will exist? Are we ever truly free? How are our choices actually made? How should we be held responsible for our actions? If determinism is true, how can we be free in any sense?

Definition (Determinism)**.** Everything that takes place now was determined in the past by earlier events. Past states necessitate the current state of the world. If you know a given state and all the natural laws, you can predict with certainty how the system will progress. *Determinism*

Problem 1.3 (Causation)**.** What does it mean for one thing to determine another thing? How does one billiard ball cause another to move when they strike one another? When a rock breaks a window, does the rock cause the breakage, or does God?

Problem 1.4 (Skepticism)**.** Do we really know that things exist or the state of things? What does knowing something actually mean? How do we know that we aren't all dreaming? Is there a deceiving God which invents a false reality for use to perceive? Do we really know future events, like the sun will rise tomorrow or if the eraser is let go then it will fall to the ground?

Definition (Idealism)**.** Physical objects which exist in the world (objective things) are dependent on the mind, and the perception of these objects by the mind is what instantiates them. *Idealism*

Problem 1.5 (God)**.** Does God exist? How do we know? Can we prove it? Is God beholden to natural laws? Is God nature itself?

Definition (Metaphysics)**.** The study of what exists. *Metaphysics*

Definition (Epistemology)**.** The study of how do we know that something exists.

Epistemology

Definition (Principle of Sufficient Reason)**.** The claim that for everything that exists and every occurance, there is an explanation for it. There is always a way to understand something even if we don't understand it yet. Invoked in a philosophers' *Finest Hour*.

Principle of Sufficient Reason

2 January 16, 2019

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Lecture Outline

1. Copernicus
2. Mechanism
3. Old Science
   (a) Final Causes
   (b) Substantial Forms
   (c) Trust the senses
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5. Dormitive Virtues
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10. 3 Main Aims
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    (b) Mind/body distinctions
    (c) New Science
11. Skepticism & the 3 aims
12. Reasons for doubt
13. Principles
14. A piece of paper

This was a time of great upheaval in science and reasoning. Aristotelian science was being replaced with a new mechanistic science. The 16th century was coming out of the Renaissance, and Copernicus introduced the heliocentric model in 1543. Galileo Galilee also got in trouble with the Church and was placed under house arrest in 1632, when Descartes was 36 years old. He came out with his own heliocentric model in *Le Monde*, but he chose not to publish out of fear of retribution. Other changes were going on as well; natural philosophy was embracing *mechanism* as a means to explain the natural world.

Old Science & Critiques

1. **Appeals to final causes** — God created the Earth in order to create a place where beings could worship God. Perhaps hurricanes exist to punish humans. Generally, any action which takes place *must have a purpose.* Rocks are heavy and their purpose it to seek the center of the earth. Dogs bark because *it is their nature to do so.* Humans are rational, and their final cause is to reason.
2. **Appeals to substantial forms** — All rocks are heavy; all humans can reason, so that is their form; a dog's form is to bark. Generally, every *substance* has a *form.* A

pan becomes hot when it is put on a stove because the fire has a certain quality has the form of heat and the pan acquires that form. If you paint a wall red, it acquires the form of redness from the paint. When we see the wall, our eyes and soul acquire the form of redness, so forms can be acquired without a transfer of matter.

3. **Trusting the senses** — we perceive things as they actually are. Senses give an accurate description of reality without deception.

Mechanists critique these ideas based on circular reasoning; they feel that saying "the pan becomes hot becomes it acquires heat" is a tautology. Likewise with "walls become red when they acquire redness." These justifications are not illuminating. Molière mocked this by saying sleeping pills work because they have *dormitive virtues*, which is circular. Without identifying *how* these process work, no insight is gained. Modern philosophers reject these ideas because they don't explain anything: for something to exist, it must do explanatory work. Instead of forms, modern philosophers appealed to matter an motion: pans become hot when the kinetic energy of their molecules increases. This also explains what coldness is.

The relevant characteristics of particles are their size, shape, movement, and so on. Things seem red only because they reflect light at certain wavelengths. Color, taste, sound, smell, all of these were explained by size and shape and motion. The fundamental characteristics are all easily measured, allowing mathematics to be introduced to natural philosophy. There are many implications of this. *Skepticism* was introduced (or rejuvenated) on account of the lack of trust which was placed in our senses. Another implication is that perception doesn't involve mind or soul becoming like the things it perceives. This means that the soul no longer has any characteristics (size, shape, color) while the body does, meaning that the two *must* be distinct. Free will also became an acute worry on account of the rather deterministic account of the mechanistic world-view. Finally, this new science introduced new methodology to philosophy itself, axiomatizing philosophical discussions. Spinoza adopts these tools, but Descartes and Leibniz also used it. Philosophy becomes modeled on science and mathematics, adopting the same laws as these disciplines. This partly led to *Naturalism* where people seek to discover the laws of man, trying to emulate Newton and other scientists.

Descartes

Came from a well-off family. Mother died while young, educated thoroughly at a Jesuit school in the old, Aristotelian science. He wanted to be a mathematician (and he succeeded) and he wanted to apply mathematical methods to nature. In 1610 he had a series of dreams which inspired this quest. By the late 1620s he had begun considering metaphysics.

The *Meditations* are modeled after religious meditations in which he gradually comes to certain realizations. He starts at the beginning with a common sense interpretation of the

world and works to embrace a new, metaphysical view of the world. Before they were published, the *Meditations* were circulated by his agent to leading philosophers and in turn Descartes published his replies. This makes the *Meditations* more of a back-and-forth dialog between Descartes and many leading thinkers. Descartes wrote in Latin first, and then in French.

Descartes corresponded with Princess Elisabeth and many other philosophers through letters (the blogs and Facebook posts of the day). He died in 1650

The 3 Main Aims of Meditations

In *Meditations* Descartes set out to do the following.

1. Prove the Existence of God;
2. Prove that the Mind and Body are Distinct; and
3. Establish the New Science. This one was subtle and more implicit; he wanted to destroy the Aristotelian science by inculcating in people and acceptance of his principles before they realized it overturned Aristotle.

Notably absent from this list is raising up Skepticism, which is one of the main motifs of the work.