

PHIL 20C Discussion Section Week 1

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Three broad themes from last week:

- The revolution in science: from Aristotelianism to the “New Science”
- Rationalism vs. Empiricism
- A new approach to the study of human nature.

The old science explained things in terms of four kinds of explanation. Aristotelian science regarded everything in the world as having a purpose or goal (a ‘final cause’) and regarded things as having ‘essences’. Aristotelian science explains the world in terms of final causes and essences. Exactly what this means is tangential to the course and pretty arcane. Basically:

- The essence of some sort of thing is ‘what it is to be’ that thing. For instance, to be human is to be a rational animal.
- The final cause of a thing is its purpose or goal; when a rock falls to the ground, that’s because the ‘proper resting place’ of a heavy thing like a rock is on the ground.

The new science instead begins with our experiences, and tries to find underlying mechanistic causes for those experiences.

Causes are certain physical states of the world. A mechanistic explanation will cite a cause and a law of nature that shows why an effect – e.g., a phenomenon – is to be expected in virtue of that physical state.

Rationalism tells us that there is a special ‘cognitive faculty’ – a fancy word for an ability that your mind has – that allows us to have knowledge of certain truths.

- Essences
- Mathematical truths
- Moral truths

Empiricism tells us that there is no cognitive faculty aside from the senses and the imagination. The imagination is where sense information is stored, recalled, and manipulated.

Rationalism and empiricism have distinct answers on various points:

- Is there an a priori foundation for human knowledge?
- Are we our bodies, perhaps our brains?
- Are there non-imagistic concepts?

Descartes and his school of rationalism answered these questions, “Yes, no, and yes”:

- Yes, the intellect is able to prove many general truths about the world independently of sense experience.
- The intellect is the capacity of an immaterial soul distinct from, but connected to, a body.
- We are able to think using non-imagistic concepts because we have intellectual capacity.

Rejecting the existence of the intellect, Hobbes answered these questions:

- No. Most, perhaps all, knowledge comes either from the senses or language.
- Yes, we are material bodies. There is no immaterial soul.
- Yes, but we have to explain how non-imagistic concepts are possible, given that all of our knowledge comes from images given to us by the senses.

Hobbes's non-imagistic concepts are of two sorts, not mutually exclusive:

- General concepts: terms for kinds of things, or properties of things, etc. that can apply to more than one thing. Since two things of the same kind are not for the most part completely identical, we can't just form of a picture of a kind of thing.
- Relational concepts: these are mental representations that can be explained in descriptive terms, like "The thing such that, etc...", etc. Any idea of something that never manifests itself in experience is of this sort.

In other words, the reason we are able to think using non-imagistic concepts is that we have language. Having a non-imagistic concept just means being able to follow the rules of language that allow us to speak in general, non-specific terms.