History of Modern Philosophy

Lecture 1: Introduction

By Victor Gijsbers, September 2023

Introduction to the introduction

Welcome. No difference between *History of Modern Philosophy* and *World Philosophies: Modern Europe*. Who I am. What we will be doing:

* Online lectures that you should pre-watch; this time I didn't have you pre-watch them, but that changes from next week

* Live lectures

* Spending some time on practical matters; e. g., today I want to discuss **how to read a text**

* Books

* Which topics we will be focusing on (see also Brightspace)

In this lecture, I want to give a preliminary answer to two questions that are raised by a course such as this. First, why study the history of philosophy? After all, no physicist will get a course on the history of modern physics in her first year; in fact, I doubt that even historians would get a course on the history of historiography. Why are philosophers so obsessed with the history of their discipline?

Second, what's so special about this period we call "modern philosophy", and which is roughly the 17th and 18th century? I will give you a broad strokes overview of what's happening *in general* in this period, and then we'll delve into the special nature of European philosophy in the 17th and 18th century. As we will see, one thing that sets the philosophers of the 17th and 18th century apart, is precisely how they think about the history of philosophy – so all the ideas hang together.

This, by the way, is something I consider completely typical for philosophy. Every question turns out to be related to every other question; to understand one thing, you must understand everything. Getting there may be an impossible journey… but personally, I think its worth spending a serious part of your life doing precisely that.

Why study the history of philosophy?

- Philosophers are obsessed by the history of their field, much more so than perhaps practitioners in *all* other fields. It may always be *interesting* to study the history of your field. But clearly, philosophers – most of them, at least – believe that in philosophy it is nothing less than *essential*. Somehow, studying the history of philosophy is a way of doing philosophy. How so? **GROUP DISCUSSION.**
- Here is one way to think about it: the history of philosophy is the history of thinkers of genius, whose theories and arguments might well be true and valid; or may at least contain the seeds for true theories and valid argument. We study the history of philosophy to mine it

for interesting ideas and good insights. This way of thinking portrays the great philosophers of the past as being still, in some way, quite *close* to us. And there's something to be said for it. Let me give you three examples:

- Aristotle's virtue ethics and Kant's ethical writings have been a major inspiration for ethical theorists in the past fifty years, as you will no doubt discover during the Ethics course that you'll also follow this semester. You can describe a contemporary ethicist as a Kantian, and people will know what you mean.
- Hume's attack on the idea that causation is a necessary connection, and his claim that cause and effect are only contingently related, is perhaps the orthodox position in the current philosophy of causation. People call themselves humeans or neo-humeans.
- Kant's argument against the ontological proof for the existence of God is still held to be the standard counterargument against the ontological proof. This is not to say that everyone agrees with Kant; but if you do want to defend an ontological proof in this day and age, you must be sure that your proof can withstand Kant's attack.

- On this way of thinking, history is a source of truth and inspiration; and not knowing about the history of philosophy may make us philosophically naive. And it's a good way of thinking. For these thinkers *are* still close to us, and their works still speak to us. There is a sense in which they are still our contemporaries.
- However, there is also a problem with this way of thinking. It legitimates the study of the history of philosophy *only* insofar as we *can* glean truth from it; which means that we should study only those philosophers, and only those parts of their works, which are indeed 'close' to us – which deal with things we care about in ways we find congenial. But much of the history of philosophy is not like that at all. In fact, these thinkers and their texts can also seem very *distant* from us. Let's see some examples of that.
  - In Descartes' *Meditations*, it turns out that we can only legitimate empirical – sensory – knowledge on the basis of a proof of the existence of God. Far from God's existence being either dubious or a matter of faith, Descartes holds it to be more evident than the fact that I have hands. What's more, as a crucial step in his argumentation, Descartes accepts the following claim, which he finds absolutely evident: *The cause of an idea must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality.* The language used is distant from us; but even when we have unpacked it, this is so far from being an evident truth for us, that we rather tend to think of it as evidently false. How can Descartes, at the very moment he attempts to be maximally critical, accept such a thesis?
  - Leibniz constructs a metaphysical system according to which all of us are 'windowless monads': substances that are complete closed off from each other. But they are all pre-programmed by God to have an internal evolution that mirrors the evolution of all other monads. So I *am*, Leibniz would say, in some sense talking to you; but there is no causal relation between me and you; rather, you have been pre-programmed to have sensations that exactly fit my decisions about what to say. How can a brilliant thinker take such an absurd system seriously?
- So what we see is that the great thinkers of history can be very distant from us; and indeed, it takes a lot of time and imagination to get into their mindset. But in fact, this shows us

another reason to study them! For philosophy must always start by critically examining things that we hold to be self-evident; to wonder whether our current way of thinking is the right way of thinking. And the very best way to do that, is to come into contact with radically different ways of thinking. Studying the history of philosophy reveals to us how large the space of possible conceptions of the world really is; and it is that sense of space and possibility that makes philosophy so exhilarating and radical.

- What's more, the practice of putting yourself into a radically different mindset is very important. It is all too easy, in daily life but also in philosophy, to accept your own convictions as reasonable and everything else as stupid. (We are particularly good at this when it comes to ethics and politics.) Studying the history of philosophy is invaluable training for the ability to see what is reasonable about other people's beliefs; for learning to ask the question: what ways of thinking *make* it reasonable to say this?
- So when we study the history of philosophy, we will – I hope – always be aware of this tension between closeness and distance, between the feeling that the great philosophers of the past are our contemporaries and the feeling that they lived in a different world. We will try to critically assess what they say, while at the same time being aware that it is hard for us to fully understand what they are saying.
- One more thing. The history of philosophy is, I would argue, not just a random succession of ideas and positions. Not just some relations of influence either. A story that exhibits at least some logical necessity and has made us who we are. This, in fact, is Hegel's view of the role of history. But none of the philosophers of the 17th and 18th century would have fully agreed.
- We will now move to the second question: what is modern philosophy? Why study the 17th and 18th century? It will turn out that understanding modern philosophy requires us to understand the early modern's negative approach to the history of philosophy. About this, more later in this lecture.
- Still, there is one deep question we have not yet answered. All of the above might seem as true for any other discipline as it is for philosophy. And yet it is philosophy, and only philosophy, that does this. Why? Surely, it has something to do with the fact that philosophy remains relevant. Aristotle was a biologist, a physicist, and so many other things – yet it is only we philosophers who still read him and embrace him as one of our own. How so?
- The negative answer might be: because we make no progress. We are still thinking about the same questions, still trying out the same answers. What truths have we discovered since Aristotle? And there is something to it, something that you will have to reconcile yourself with as a philosopher. (Either that, or you will turn into a philosophical hero worshipper who has decided that, say, Heidegger was always right.) But perhaps this story gets it wrong in a fundamental way. Perhaps the very aim of philosophy is, at least in part, to *enrich us*, to give us a world of thought that contains vastly more possibilities, and vastly more depth, than we knew was possible. If so, then studying the thinkers of the past is not just useful indirectly; it is itself one of the primary aims of philosophy. And I sincerely hope that this course will help to convince you of the incredible richness of human thought.

The 17th and 18th century

But first I want to visualise a little bit the period that we are talking about. Here are the seven philosophers who will be most central in our story:

René Descartes: 1596-1650

Baruch Spinoza: 1632-1677

John Locke: 1632-1694

Gottfried Leibniz: 1646-1716

David Hume: 1711-1776

Immanuel Kant: 1724-1804

Mary Shepherd: 1777 - 1847

Here are some more philosophers, all of them quite important in their own right:

Francis Bacon: 1561-1626

Galileo Galilei: 1564-1642

Thomas Hobbes: 1588-1679

Margaret Cavendish: 1623 - 1673

Blaise Pascal: 1623-1662

Isaac Newton: 1643-1727

Nicolas Malebranche: 1638-1715

George Berkeley: 1685-1753

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: 1712-1778

Johann Gottlieb Fichte: 1762-1814

G. W. F. Hegel: 1770-1831

How to read a text

See slides.

What is modern philosophy?

- Brief philosophy courses often jump straight from the Greeks to Descartes, maybe just mentioning Augustine or Aquinas in between. Why? What happens in philosophy that sets the early 17th century apart as something of a new beginning, a new era that we call ‘modern’, and that we feel much more connected to than even the 16th century? These are the questions I want to discuss. What *is* modern philosophy, and what makes it modern?
- First, make no mistake about ‘modern’ here. It is a word used in many different ways – as a word of approval, or disapproval, or just as a name for one of many different eras. The ‘modern’ of “modern art” is really not the same as that of “modernism” in literature, or

"modern philosophy." Best to see it as a term of art, describing the 17th and 18th century in Europe. (And even here there is confusion: "early modern".)

- And a word of caution. Historical discontinuities are always also continuities. There is much in Descartes that comes straight from the centuries before him. It is of course not *really* a miraculous new start. And yet, something does change, and we can fruitfully discuss what it is. What was radically new in Descartes?
- I think the best way to start answering that question is to look at the way philosophers treated the history of philosophy, and saw their own position in that history. Aristotle's use of history. Later antiquity's tendency for hero worship. The scholastics and being part of a tradition. The Renaissance as rediscovery: Lipsius.
- Bacon, Hobbes and Descartes as the radical break. What is radically innovative in Descartes is his insistence that he is radically innovative; that he is not and does not want to be beholden to the thinkers of the past.
- Cartesian scepticism doesn't start with the demon; it starts with the thought that perhaps all that we have learned is wrong. We need a clean break with the past so that we can grasp the full truth.
- Does this even make sense? Would you be able to come up with ethics on your own after a bad childhood? It is certainly not the way that a scientist goes about his/her business. But the early modern philosophers – with the possible exception of Leibniz – want to do it. It is what makes it possible for Descartes to become the father of modern philosophy – he explicitly sets out to create something new, and it is primarily this setting out that *is* the something new.
- Does he succeed? That is a question I want to come back to. First, let us ask why it happens here, in the early 17th century. Why was the time ripe for a supposed break with the past? Several factors come together:
    - There is, first, the waning of religious authority; or rather, of religion as self-evident and unproblematic. People had always known that there were other religions, but it's easy to ignore that when they're living on a different continent. But the 16th century was the century of Luther and Calvin; reformation and counter-reformation. There was the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre ("bloedbruiloft") in 1572, the gun powder plot in 1605. Religious tensions were everywhere, and with them a decay of the idea that religion gives a self-evident background against which we live our live.
    - There was, second, the great increase of knowledge about foreign cultures. Starting from the 15th century, Europeans had colonised large parts of the new and old worlds, and while few of them were objective anthropologists, knowledge of customs and beliefs utterly different from our own could not help but enter European consciousness. This in turn made it easier to question our own ways of thinking and our own traditions.
    - There was, third, the rise of the new science. This is important enough to our story that I will spend an entire lecture on it; and let me stress already that natural science and philosophy were very closely intertwined. But the new science *destroyed* the idea that the Aristotelian knowledge taught at the universities was correct; in fact, it destroyed even the fundamental ideas underlying this knowledge. This meant that for everyone

interested in the physical sciences, it seemed as if a radical new philosophy of nature was needed.

    - And let me just point out that, fourth, this went hand in hand with a revolt against the conservative nature of the universities. Until Kant, *none* of the great philosophers of the 17th and 18th century were at universities, which for a long time continued to teach scholastic and Aristotelian ideas. When you are outside the establishment, it is always easier to think of yourself as a radical rebel!

- Let us return to the question: does Descartes succeed in making a clean break with the past? No, he doesn't succeed. The Cartesian argument for the existence of God; the Cartesian idea that what is conceivable must be possible. And *of course* he doesn't succeed. It's impossible. Hegel is right. There is no unconditioned thinking. But all the moderns have to claim that there is, identify it, and use it to reconstruct our knowledge. **The modern philosopher wants to be a new beginning; and this means that they want to be fully self-contained centres of knowledge and justification, able to set up a coherent and complete philosophical system.**

- Let me explain that. A fully self-contained centre of knowledge and justification: all our knowledge must come from ourselves, what we find in ourselves. This is the main idea of Descartes' *Meditations*, and it remains the main idea up until and including Kant. It remains with us: it is the ideal of critical thinking, but also the example of Mad Mike, who wanted to test for himself whether the Earth is round. In *science*, nobody believes this anymore. (Descartes more or less did; Kant certainly did not.) But in *philosophy*? Is this not still what we want… and why we love it? (Maybe not! It's fine with me if you say 'no'! **GROUP DISCUSSION?**)

- If this is possible, then the result, if it is to be more than a few scattered insights, must be a metaphysical *system* involving metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of science and philosophy of religion. It must a big story about fundamental reality. Unlike 20th century philosophers, the great figures of the 17th and 18th century tend to give us such a system. Heroically, they start within themselves, and end up with a complete theory of the universe, utterly certain!

- That was the quest of modern philosophy. It was a titanic quest; a quixotic quest, to be sure. If it was a dream, we are still waking up from it; if it was a disease, we are still recovering. Or perhaps we are succumbing. Perhaps we *want* to succumb. And one of the reasons that the 17th and 18th century are so much fun to study, is that these people – Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant – dared to do what we also secretly hope or hoped to achieve.