

1

Introduction to Modern Philosophy

* Mathew Pattamana

Introduction

In this unit, which is an introduction to the whole course, we shall focus on two paramount and seemingly separate characteristics of modern philosophy: its relentless search for solid *foundations* and its resolute turn toward *subjectivity*. While the Renaissance, the Reformation, the discovery of the New World, the rise of Science and Capitalism, represent the *external* (socio-historical) determinants of modernity, its major *internal* driving forces have been undoubtedly the human *subjectivity* (freedom, creativity, innovation, autonomy, self-reflection) and the new spirit of *foundationalism* (laying down firm and stable grounds of all human knowledge and practical endeavor).

The 'I' (the *Ego*), the most basic principle of human subjectivity in general, becomes both the center and an all-pervasive philosophical theme of modern thought. It integrates as different contents as the ancient concept of soul, the medieval spirit, the Cartesian consciousness or the mind and the 'transcendental apperception' of Kant. Descartes grasps the principle of subjectivity as an abstract 'thinking thing,' while Kant conceives it as a self-relating subject that attains absolute self-consciousness. For both, the contents of our mind are the products of an active subjectivity which is the

Dr. Mathew Pattamana, Good Shepherd College, Kunnoth

fountain of all knowledge. By examining its operations and achievements they respond to the skepticism of their predecessors and contemporaries.

The modern quest for the new reliable foundations manifests itself in the form of the first and the most universal principle that grounds and defines everything else in the totality of the world. However, instead of searching for the first principles of being(s), modern philosophers are looking for the first principles of human knowledge. This *epistemological turn* away from the ancient cosmological and medieval theological approach was performed in a ground breaking manner by Rene Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). A more decisive and elaborate transformation of ancient Metaphysics (i.e., First Philosophy) into a science of *a priori* principles of human knowledge was subsequently carried out by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). The Kantian emphasis on the necessity of new foundations was largely determined by the Cartesian project and needs to be placed into the same overall context of modern thinking. While Descartes introspectively reconstructs the contents of his consciousness Kant transcendently reconstructs the *a priori* workings of the cognizing subject. Despite all the differences in their respective positions, subjectivity in Kant's philosophy remains the main source of self-reflection and of *a priori* legislation. Kant replaces the Cartesian quest for absolute certainty with a concern for the *a priori* forms of intuition and understanding, but subjectivity is no less their origin for him than it was the source of certainty for Descartes. Both Descartes and Kant view mathematics as the model of knowledge. Accordingly, Descartes conceives mathematics as the unified science of the entire world, whereas Kant takes the supposed *synthetic a priori* judgments of mathematics as the pattern for the reformed (scientific) metaphysics.

A transformation of the *old ontological paradigm* into a new subject-centered (though not necessarily subjectivist) perspective lies at the core both of the Cartesian *epistemological* and the Kantian *transcendental turn*. This characterization is not misguided provided one does not lose out of sight the common denominator in the whole process, which is the idea of subjectivity as the foundation of all spheres of human pursuit. The *subject* supplies not only the original point of departure and the only directly accessible subject-matter of the mind, but it ultimately secures the *objectivity* of possible objects as well. Although subjective by their origin, the *a priori* principles of knowledge acquire objective validity by becoming the conditions of possibility for any objectivity. Thus the true source of every *objective foundation* eventually turns out to be the *subjectivity of the subject* itself.

While Descartes describes the contents of our consciousness in terms of mental events and entities, Kant is very anxious to avoid any substantification of our subjectivity. He clearly prefers to speak about judgments, propositions and human representations rather than about 'thinking things' or mental events occurring in our mind. With Kant, theory of knowledge definitely ceases to search for the most certain representations and turns its attention instead toward the rules which *a priori* determine how we acquire any possible experience. This means that Kant does not any longer conceive knowledge upon the old model of reliable perceptions although he still remains caught in the language of accurate representations. Nonetheless, instead of dealing with "objects in themselves," Kant sets forth to examine the conditions of their possibility as they are given in our experience, following the critical spirit of renaissance and reformation.

Influences of Renaissance and Reformation

As we know the philosophy of a period arises as a response to the then existing social situations and social needs. And the development of philosophy in the history of Western civilization since the Renaissance has, thus, reflected in the thinking pattern of the philosophers of that time. Thus, Western philosophy in the middle ages was primarily a Christian philosophy, complementing the divine revelation. Renaissance and Reformations were two great reform movements that took place in 15th and 16th century. During this period there was a growing tendency to find fault with the old tradition, with the old language, the art, theological system, political relations of the church and state.

The reflective spirit generated by reformation and renaissance strengthened an abiding faith in the power of human reason, an intense interest in natural things, a lively yearning for civilization and progress. In scientific, religious, social, moral and political fields there was a demand for freedom and expression. The over all result was a slow but steady collapse of the ecclesiastical and political organization that was prevalent in the middle ages.

The same spirit of reformation and renaissance is reflected in the modern philosophy. So Modern philosophy is furnished with a different out look, a mental out look different from Greek and medieval philosophy. In modern philosophy two important aspects can be emphasized i.e., dismissing authority of the church and giving importance to the authority of the science. As we have studied last year medieval philosophy always wedded to theology. During that time philosophy was considered as the handmaid of theology. But modern philosophy originated at the wake of scientific developments and it always remained as subservient to science.

Thus we have the description of modern philosophy. According to Frank Thilly "Modern Philosophy may be viewed as an awaking of the reflective spirit quickening of criticism, as a revolt against absolutism and collectivism as a demand for freedom in thought, feeling and action." It sums up the nature of modern Philosophy.

Modern philosophy is generally said to have begun with Francis Bacon in England and with Rene Descartes in France. For ex: Francis Bacon began his philosophy with an attack on the Aristotelian deductive method and proposed new starting point for philosophy i.e., inductive method. The power of a single religious authority was slowly eroded under the influence of the Protestant Reformation and as the prestige of the universal Latin language gave way to vernacular tongues, philosophers became less and less identified with their positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and more and more identified with their national origins.

Characteristics of Modern Thought in General

Modern philosophy has a mental outlook, which differs from that of the medieval period in many ways. As we have seen, with Descartes in France and with Francis Bacon in England, it is generally said that modern philosophy took its origin. These philosophers strongly believed that they have initiated new systems of thought, which inaugurated a new philosophical tradition which largely distinct from the medieval inheritance. We will see the new element present in their thought and the major topics or concerns of these philosophers.

Hence it is appropriate to note some of the important differences between medieval and post-medieval philosophies. 1. The desire for independence, leads the post-medieval philosophers to find expression in the freedom of enquiry and freedom of thinking 2. The

medieval philosophers wrote and taught in Latin language, whereas the modern philosophers increasingly made use of the vernacular language 3. In the middle age, philosophers were mainly theologians. The modern thinkers in general were not theologians. 4. Again, there was a shift of emphasis from theological themes to the study of man and nature without explicit reference to God. 5. Almost all the medieval philosophers were mainly University professors engaged in teaching. On the other hand, the majority of the modern philosophers were not associated with academic teaching. Francis Bacon and Descartes were not teachers, Spinoza was not in favour of positions and refused to accept the invitation from Heidelberg University; Leibniz had refused the professorship for his personal reasons; Locke held some post in the state; Berkeley was a bishop. In short the modern philosophers were from different life circumstances. 6. Philosophy in this period was a concern of the fresh minds and not of the traditionalists. In general, the awakening of the reflective spirit, a spirit of criticism, a spirit of revolt against tradition and authority, a plea for freedom of reason, a shift of orientation etc. can be seen in this period. We can summarise the chief characteristics of modern western philosophy as the following.

The Spirit of Criticism

The critical spirit that soon grew into a revolt against authority and tradition, absolutism and collectivism of church and the state. Modern philosophy began as revolt against the religion- oriented thinking of the medieval period and had its origin in the new intellectual awakening, the Renaissance. Thinkers developed a keen critical faculty. They refused to accept traditions and scriptures without critical examination. Descartes' methodic doubt influenced the thinkers to never accept

anything as true without doubting. There was a tendency to liberate every aspect of the society from the influence of the church. Philosophy at this time also shared the time to free search for a definite knowledge.

Revolt Against Tradition and Authority

The salient feature of the medieval mind was of an uncritical and blind acceptance of authority and power overemphasized by theology and salvation neglecting the human freedom and life on earth. But modern mind the secular authority replaced ecclesiastical authority and as the dominant interest of the age shifted from religion to politics, it was natural that the rivalries of the national states and their persistent crises of internal order should raise with renewed urgency philosophical problems, practically dormant since pre-Christian times, about the nature and the moral status of political power. This new preoccupation with national unity, internal security, state power, and international justice stimulated the growth of political philosophy in Italy, France, England, and Holland.

Predominance of the Scientific Spirit

One of the outstanding characteristics of modern philosophy is that it is scientific. In the Middle Ages theology was regarded as the supreme science, but in the post-medieval period the natural sciences begin to occupy the centre of the stage. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, we are still in a period when the philosopher is confident that he, like the scientist, can add to our knowledge of the world. The 16th and 17th cent. Philosophy was most influenced by the development of natural and physical science. The marvellous success of modern science induced the philosophers to apply scientific method in the field of philosophy too. The new discoveries in science changed

the worldview of the modern period. Renaissance scientists were more interested in quantitative measurements rather than qualitative explanation and contemplation of nature. They destroyed the static world-scheme of Middle-ages, which was based to a large extent on the speculative theories of Aristotle combined with presuppositions in the Bible. They rebelled against scholasticism. Human person was a microcosm, a miniature of the immense universe. Because of this relationship, man could coerce nature, understand her laws and her behaviour, and ultimately become king of creation. Science was the answer to the how of this and they achieved as they wished.

Four great men-Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton – are pre-eminent in the creation of science. Of these Copernicus belonged to the sixteenth century, but in his own time had little influence. Copernicus put forward the heliocentric theory for the first time, even though as a hypothesis. Kepler was the first important astronomer after Copernicus to adopt the heliocentric theory. Kepler's great achievement was the discovery of his three laws of planetary motion. Galileo is the greatest of the founders of modern science, with the possible exception of Newton. Galileo was the first to establish the law of falling bodies. Newton (1642-1727) achieved the final and complete triumph for which Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo had prepared the way.

Thus the physical science of the 17th and 18th centuries had a great influence on the philosophical thinking. The new astronomy and the new mathematical systems not only created a different outlook on part of the scientists: likewise changed the perspective of the philosophers. In the medieval ages philosophy *was* crowned by theology. In opposition to this modern philosophy is scientific in its outlook it is no longer the handmaid of theology. It

has a method of its own and it becomes the interpreter of science. Moreover what is called the European Renaissance followed upon the introduction of three novel mechanical inventions from the East: gunpowder, block printing from movable type, and the compass. The first was used to explode the massive fortifications of the feudal order and thus became an agent of the new spirit of nationalism that threatened the rule of churchmen with a competing secular power. The second, printing, made the propagation of knowledge widespread, secularised learning, reduced the intellectual monopoly of an ecclesiastical elite, and restored the literary and philosophical classics of Greece and Rome. The third, the compass, increased the safety and scope of navigation, produced the voyages of discovery that opened up the Western Hemisphere, and symbolized a new spirit of physical adventure and a new scientific interest in the structure of the natural world.

Each of these inventions with its wider cultural consequences presented new intellectual problems and novel philosophical tasks within a changed political and social environment.

The Development of Humanism

The development of humanism was another characteristic of modern thought. The Renaissance was characterized by the renewed study of mathematics, medicine, and classical literature. The first two sparked the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries; the last became the foundation of the philosophy of Renaissance humanism. From its origin, humanism – suspicious of science and generally indifferent to religion emphasized anew the centrality of man in the universe, his supreme value and importance. Humanism represented for a passion of learning and a stress on scholarly exactness.

They gave importance to man than God and reason over faith. They contrasted the medieval sterile thinking with that of the Greek and Roman thinking and cultural diversity. Characteristic of this emphasis was the famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (written 1486; *Oration on the Dignity of Man*) of a late 15th-century Platonist, Pico della Mirandola, a leading member of Lorenzo de' Medici's Platonic Academy of Florence. But the new emphasis upon man's personal responsibility and on the possibility of his self-creation as a work of art was in no small part a consequence of the rediscovery of a series of crucial classical texts, which served to reverse the trends of medieval learning. Humanism stressed the need for a political, economic, cultural, religious and social change. New books were created expressing the flowering of human spirit that criticised the powerful and ridiculed the mighty and praising the common man singing his passions and interests. Renaissance humanism was predicated upon the victory of rhetoric over dialectic and of Plato over Aristotle.

Individualism:

In line with the development of humanism we can see the growth of individualism as an important characteristic of modern philosophy. Emancipation from the authority of the Church led to the growth of individualism. Modern Philosophy has retained for the most part an individualistic and subjective tendency. The authority of the church over the mind gradually weakened and the individual began to gradually assert his intellectual independence. Modern philosophy is always individualistic in its thinking. While Greek and medieval philosophers were more institutional for example Plato and Aristotle were supported and directed by the city-states. In the Middle Ages philosophers were usually monks. The monks philosophised only in accordance

with the institutions in which they were members. In the modern period philosophers are more individualistic and the spirit of subjectivity is the main thrust. There was an individualistic and subjective tendency in modern thinkers. This is marked very much in Descartes, who builds up all knowledge from the certainty of his own existence, and accepts clearness and distinctness (both subjective) as criteria of truth

In this process each philosopher has his own method. Philosophers of modern period accepts nothing as true simply because it is asserted by the authority. They gave importance to originality rather than conventionality. Their disagreement and difference were seen as the plus point of their originality. Since the universe is very vast so many truths can be exposed. He sees some aspects of truth, which no one has ever seen.

Secularism:

A shift of interest from the contemplation of super natural things to the explanation of natural things is an important characteristic of modern philosophy. Reason and logic were accepted as the final criteria both in the field of philosophy. The intellectuals of the modern thought realised that the truth cannot be arrived at through the dogmatic statements of the religious authorities but only through the freethinking. And hence, thinking freed itself from the clutches of the religious authorities and turned towards the natural subjects. Religion was pushed into the background by science and philosophy. Philosophy was brought down from heaven to the earth. Philosophy became more secular. So far philosophy is considered to be subservient to theology or to explain and confirm theological matter, the temporal order was self sufficient to explain everything. Consequently God and religion lost their relevance among temporal concept. Knowledge

was sought no more for its own sake but for its practical utility i.e., in view of its achievements in mechanics, technology, medicine etc.

Predominance of Reason:

The main landmark of modern Philosophy, which distinguishes it from the medieval thinking is its growing faith in the power of reason. It is this faith in the assumed power of reason, which was responsible for the fresh researches and explorations in the field of Natural science, and for the unprecedented progress in every field of life. Beginning With Francis Bacon every new thinker wanted to improve life by applying the research into nature. There was an awakening in the realm of knowledge. Reason became the sole authority in the matters concerning Philosophy and science (Truth is not something to be dedicated by authority- ecclesiastical or political, but something to be discovered by free and impartial investigation). Hence attempts were made to develop a new Philosophical method after the model of mathematical science so as to make Philosophical investigation really scientific and reasonable.

The Changing Face of the Church and the State

The political conflict was settled in favour of the state and the state took the place of kings, kingdom and the empire. Within the state itself there appeared a growing tendency towards the formation of constitutions and democratic institutions. There was a revolt against collectivism, feudalism and other social evils. The demand for greater social justice shook then the political and social structures leading to the gradual disintegration of the empires into small states marking the emergence of nationalism

In church also there were reactions and renewals due to reformation. The absolutism of the church in religious moral and intellectual fields was also strongly questioned. In the place of scholastic Theology, the elaborate questions of indulgences and rituals of the church the reformation emphasized an inner religion and personal worship: justification by faith instead of justification by work. The individual began to throw off the yoke of the church and refused to accept church as the source of faith. Reason became the sole authority, the protest of the heart against mechanizations of the faith got more appreciations

Modern philosophy is rationalistic in the sense that it makes human reason the highest authority in the pursuit of knowledge. It is naturalistic in the sense that it seeks to explain inner and outer nature without supernatural presuppositions. It is thus scientific, keeping in touch with the new sciences, especially the science of external nature. It does not mean the modern thinkers were totally deprived of the scholastic theses; in fact there is continuity and discontinuity in their thought patterns. Sometimes the difference is more evident in their discussions. In general, empiricism and rationalism are the main streams of thought in this period, together with scepticism and idealism.

Quickening of criticism as a revolt against authority and tradition, demand for freedom in thought, feeling and action, assertion of nationalism against ecclesiasticism and in nationalism plea for the democracy, cry against slavery and serfdom and declaration of 'laissez faire' in economics, re-enthronement of reason in the style of Greek genius etc. mark the coming of a new era in the history of philosophy.

The Two Phases of Modern Philosophy

The phase of Modern Philosophy can be divided into two rationalism and empiricism. The spirit of rationalism is particularly associated with certain philosophers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the most important being Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. They emphasized the predominance of reason in constituting the knowledge. From the historical point of view rationalism begins with the philosophy of Descartes, the father of modern western philosophical thought. Before him, the sayings of the scriptures were accepted word by word and it was sin to doubt religious scriptures. Descartes for the first time declared that in philosophical reflections nothing should be admitted purely on the basis of faith. According to Descartes reason is the source of real knowledge. Spinoza gave a developed form of rationalism. According to him reality is rational and he explained the whole reality in terms of substance, attributes and modes. With Leibniz rationalism came to its climax. According to him there is nothing in the intellect besides the intellect itself. Intellect is the source of knowledge and experience provides only the occasion for us to become conscious of our ideas, which are totally innate. Thus while for Descartes only the basic ideas were innate, Leibniz considers all our ideas as innate. The empiricist philosophers John Locke, Barkley and Hume emphasized the role of experience and empirical origin of all ideas. However this is not strict exclusive division. Kant's great project was to combine the future of rationalism and empiricism a synthesis of both, known as synthetic a-priori. The development of philosophy after 1790 led to the revival of the old proposition under new form of idealism and positivism. The idealist philosophers Fichte, Shelling & Hegel supported the extreme views of reason and systematic thinking. Positivists Augusta Comte and J.S Mill appeal to our own experience of facts

Rationalism in General

The term rationalism has been used to refer to several different outlooks and movements of ideas. By far the most important of these is the philosophical outlook or theory of knowledge which stresses the power of a priori reason to grasp substantial truths about the world. According to rationalism intellect or reason is an independent source of knowledge. The word 'Ratio' means reason. According to them intellect is the independent source of knowledge. In our daily language rationalism comes to mean that the attempt to judge everything in the light of reason. The intellect gives us self-evident innate or a priori ideas. Thus knowledge consists of these innate ideas. These are necessary and universal truths. True knowledge is attained by innate ideas alone. Hence knowledge obtained through innate ideas is universal and necessary. Reason is the standard of knowledge and not the authority or revelation. The extreme form of rationalism does not accept any role to sense-experience in the formation of knowledge. Generally, it gives a subordinate role to experience, i.e., experience does not constitute but serve as an occasion for the exercise of intellect, whose innate idea constitute knowledge. Hence sense experience serves only as an opportunity for the play of intellect and its innate idea. Such knowledge is universal and necessary. The senses play only a secondary role in the cognitive process; they can illustrate a universal truth given by the intellect but they can not constitute knowledge. For rationalism the mind or intellect is active both in obtaining ideas and constituting ideas. Rationalist philosophers were more influenced by the model of mathematical reason because mathematics provides the model of clarity, certainty and deduction. By employing mathematical methods we can avoid the personal elements and subjective factors such as feelings, moods etc. An overall effect of rationalism was

everywhere. There was an appeal to the natural realities and things in the place of supernatural. The progress of science also gave a hope in the power of human reason to know everything.

In the 17th cent rationalists were more pre-occupied to explain the world than God. Many of them were scientists who made notable contribution to mathematics and physics. However we cannot say that they were totally irreligious.

Empiricism

The important philosophers of this movement are Locke, Berkeley and Hume. According to them there is no inborn truth. All knowledge comes from sense experience or perception. Hence the so-called necessary propositions are not necessary or absolutely certain but it gives only a portable knowledge. According to the empiricists the mind at birth is a clean state (*tabula Rasa*) All the characters of knowledge are acquired through sense experience. Sensation and reflection, the outer and inner sense experience are the only two windows through which the dark chamber of mind comes to be filled with light.

Conclusion

Modern philosophy grapples with issues raised by our attempts to understand reality scientifically, by our need to reconcile such attempts with traditional moral and religious conceptions and practices, and by our need to reconcile all of this with our commonsense understanding of our world and ourselves. Issues and problems that arise in these connections include the following. *Mental representation*: How does the mind reflect reality? Do all our concepts arise from sense experience or does the mind contain *innate ideas* which inform our understanding prior to all experience, informing, perhaps,

experience itself? Does all knowledge derive from sensory experience or are some things known *a priori* (independently of experience)? *The existence of external reality*: Are some realities mind-independent (as realists maintain), or are things-themselves thought-dependent (as idealists say)? Concerning *substance*: Are there two fundamentally different sorts of realities, mental and material (as dualists hold), or just one; and if one sort, is that one *mental* (idealism), or *physical* (materialism), or *monism* (Spinoza)? Other topics include *free will* and *causation*; *God*; the *mind-body* problem; the meaning of *life*; and the nature of *value*.

References

Adler, Mortimer J. *The Four Dimensions of Philosophy: Metaphysical, Moral, Objective, Categorical*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *A Comparative History of World Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

Scruton, Roger. *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Solomon, Robert C., and Kathleen M. Higgins. *A Passion for Wisdom: A Very Brief History of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Tarnard, Richard. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. New York: Harmony Books, 1991.