

## Survey of Key Figures in Modern Philosophy

Philosophy is a self-conscious discipline. As such, it commits significant effort to tracing and understanding the history and development of its ideas. Subject in part to the tastes of specialists in the history of ideas, the history of philosophy could be characterized in four (or five) periods: ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, Medieval philosophy, the Renaissance period, the Modern period of philosophy, and the now (arguably) emerging post-Modern philosophical period. This essay is very brief summary of some important “Modern” philosophers whose ideas have had some impact in shaping the Enlightenment perspective and to which many postmoderns react.

This Modern period represents an important shift—more accurately a more abrupt break than occurred in the Renaissance period—away from the Medieval period; broadly speaking, the Modern period is characterized by preoccupation with the autonomy of reason and the empirical investigation of the natural world. *Much of the Modern period was a break from the religious (Christian) and philosophical authority (Aristotle) of the past.* Strikingly, considerable effort was given in the Modern period to trying to solve the conundrum of the limits and capacities of man's knowledge and one can find numerous inquiries into human understanding in the literature of the time. Thanks in no small part to Rousseau and Voltaire, during this period of history there was also great transformation of political institutions. Indeed, it seems that this age, especially the eighteenth century, was preoccupied with revolting against the reigning aristocracies and creating governments in its own image. It is also important to understand that the Modern period is not homogeneous; rather, there are at least two important currents in the stream of the "modern project." For example, the early modern project could be

characterized as a quest for certainty with respect to knowledge (Cartesian certainty), but in many respects the later works of David Hume and Immanuel Kant are seen as rather severely undercutting such a project. Here we see the skepticism of the Sophists being resurrected but in a more sophisticated and powerful form. So, this period of thought with its twists and turns is of immense importance for Christians (and everybody else) to understand critically if they are to engage either the Modern "mind" or the so-called Postmodern mind.

Also, many of the views of these "modern" thinkers hold a position of status in the minds of the learned (to whom we are ministering the gospel). Thus, contemporary Christians (like us) would do well to understand these philosophers' overall epistemology, metaphysics, and ethical systems if they wish to evangelize the intellectual elite of our society on a roughly equal platform of cultural awareness. On the surface, it may look like the label postmodernism attaches itself to merely those who are currently politically active in the humanities at America's universities and *that's all we need to know*; but we, I think, must understand them at a deeper level and in some cases know them better than they know themselves. In order to do that better we turn to evaluate the development of the Modern "mindset"—the mindset to which these Postmoderns are supposedly reacting.

The purpose of this paper is to survey the epistemology, metaphysics, and ethical points of view of some of the key figures in Modern philosophy: Rene Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. All of these men have made major contributions to the legacy of Western thought and, while in some cases they are mainly preoccupied with either metaphysics or epistemology, I will try to offer a compressed

synthesis of all three areas enumerated. In light of length considerations, I will not be able to include a complete exposition of their systems in this analysis; or said another way this to our friends, if while researching I couldn't find someone's ethical perspective, I said so and left it out.

### Section I: Rene Descartes

Descartes (1596-1650) was a French mathematician and philosopher with wide interests and is commonly considered the first modern philosopher because of his approach. "He made major contributions to anatomy and physiology, optics, mathematics, and of course, philosophy."<sup>1</sup> Descartes lived in an age where there was increasing undermining of confidence in intellectual authority and tradition and greater reliance on one's own intellect. Education at the university during and before this period could be roughly expressed as believing the church in matters of religion, believing Aristotle in matters of philosophy, and learning to argue. So, we will see Descartes' ideas and methods represented a sharp break with this past Medieval philosophy.

### Descartes' Epistemology

Here my analysis will be restricted to his *Discourse on Methods* and mainly the *Meditations*. The *Discourse on Methods* published in French in 1637 is interesting because most scholarly works were then published in Latin. It may represent something of his contempt for contemporary authority; in the book this opinion is reinforced by his strategy of appealing mainly to good sense rather than to the established body of knowledge in his analysis of analytical geometry, dioptrics (the branch of geometrical optics dealing with the formation of images by lenses), and meteorology (theory of

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<sup>1</sup>Steven M. Cahn, ed. *Classics of Western Philosophy*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977, p. 299.

weather). However, by his own admission, he "touched lightly on the question of God and the human mind in that treatise."<sup>2</sup>

In 1641 he published *Meditations* (in Latin) in which he takes up the question of God and the human mind. Descartes begins his project by expressing the opinion that he has come to realize that he can doubt many of his earlier opinions on unnamed subjects. Wanting to make use of that doubt he intends to "raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom so as to begin again from the first foundations."<sup>3</sup>

The structure of his argument runs something like this: here's something I know (outside world), here's a problem with that (dreams); here's something else I can hang onto (everything said about God), here's a problem with that (the evil genius); here's something I know (sense impressions), here's a problem with that (the wax illustration); and so on. The fruit of that inquiry is that he is left with only the "clear" and "distinct idea" that he is a thinking being!<sup>4</sup> Such a starting point could not be doubted, and so he has sure knowledge at the foundations of his thinking from which he can derive all the rest of what he thinks he knows.

Ending his doubt with his existence as a thinking substance, he takes up the idea of God. God, on his account, must exist in one sense to explain his sense of perfection (fulfillment) and secondly, God must exist in order to account for the idea of perfection

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<sup>2</sup>Rene Descartes, "Preface to the Reader of *Meditations*," in Steven Cahn, ed. *Classics of Western Philosophy*. p. 304.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 308.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 313. Descartes doesn't make the statement "I think therefore I am" in the *Meditations*; rather his criteria for knowledge is "clear and distinct ideas"--innate ideas--which is characteristic (along with the notions of intuition and instinct) of the Rationalists with respect to epistemology.

which has been placed in our minds innately. This second account is a formulation of the ontological argument where it is asserted that only God could place the idea of a perfect being in a man.

There remains only the question of how I received this idea of God. For I did not draw it from the sense, and it never came to me when I did not anticipate it, as the ideas of sensible things are wont to do when these things present themselves--or seem to present themselves--to the organs of the sense. Nor has it been produced by me, for I plainly cannot add or subtract anything from it. It thus remains that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is also innate in me.

To be sure it is not astonishing that in creating me, God endowed me with this idea. . .<sup>5</sup>

In Descartes' view, we now have "mind" and "God" as real entities. Descartes will argue that God, who is the guarantor of clear and distinct ideas, will ensure a knowledge of the external world. Of course, there will be mistakes, misrepresentations, and the like which cause us to doubt whether or not there is an "out there" or not. But this doubt comes if we are without God, but we are not without God now.

So, one may justly conclude that the key to Descartes' epistemology was innate ideas—they are the foundation of knowledge which cannot be doubted. These innate ideas are recognized by their clear and distinctive quality. Knowledge is gained by "thinking about it." From there, God's existence and nature are a prop to ensure a knowledge of the outside world (a critical realist's picture). This approach to a theory of knowledge is commonly called Rationalism (when used in this somewhat technical sense). In today's parlance a person who wishes to establish his fund of knowledge on *only* absolutely sure foundations is said to suffer from Cartesian anxiety. The disturbing

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 323.

legacy of this project is that virtually all who have analyzed it carefully find it inadequate to support the conclusions that Descartes intended. What it did is encourage others to think about how we come to know without the aid of Church authority or dogma . . .and the rest is history.

### Descartes' Metaphysics

By way of review, we have seen that Descartes' system has doubt as its starting point. Mind which does the thinking (doubting) has real existence and becomes the system's foundation but not the body--at least not until after God comes along to support the idea. But since God can be known to exist by thinking about the idea of God and God can guarantee clear and distinct ideas, we can know that matter exists. This can be visualized as follows:

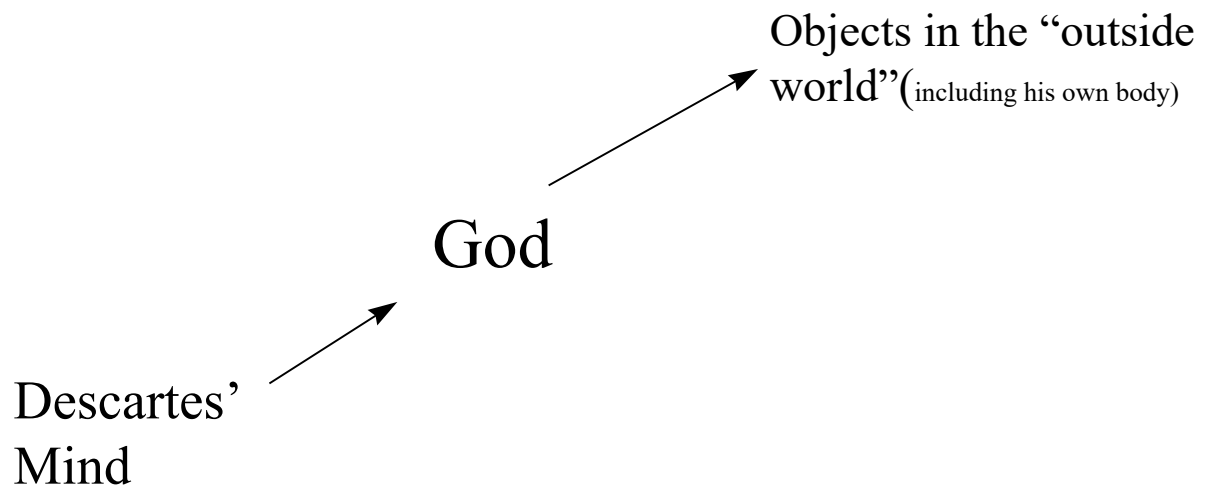


Figure #1: Descartes' Metaphysical Progression

The thing to see here is that Descartes' picture of knowledge included a knowledge of the real (metaphysical) outside world, though such knowledge wasn't at all naively accepted; rather it was critically recognized.

### Descartes' Ethics

I couldn't find any material that indicated that Descartes had spelled out his ethical system in any detail. However, some limited speculation about his ethical views can come from his *Passions of the Soul*. Here, Descartes informs us that the interaction of the soul and body occurs at the pineal gland. He held that except for some reactive mechanisms of the body (e.g., throwing up one's hands to protect oneself in a fall), man's behavior is for the most part directed by the soul. This view seems to imply Descartes holds individuals responsible for their behavior, but it's difficult to speculate beyond this.

## Section II: John Locke

John Locke (1632-1704), educated at Oxford, England and son of an attorney, is best known for two important works: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (published in 1689 after a number of revisions) and *Two Treatises of Government* (published in 1690).

## Locke's Epistemology

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was written with an express purpose: "to inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent."<sup>6</sup> Book I is an extended argument against "innate ideas" (a notion often associated with rationalist epistemology). If an innate idea were to exist, argues Locke, then children and idiots would have them but they do not.

Locke argues that knowledge then comes through two sources--our experience and *deductions* from our experience. The following passage is instructive.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 479.

Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. . . First, our Senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things. . . Secondly, the other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is,--the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got. . . such are perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all different actings of our own minds...<sup>7</sup>

So, you might say that his epistemology has both empirical and rationalistic elements. But mainly, in contrast to Descartes, he thought the "stuff" of our knowledge is from experience. Thus, he can be characterized as an empiricist with respect to theory of knowledge.

#### Locke's Metaphysics

According to Locke's account, "ideas" are formed from concrete sensations (e.g. blue, sound) and reflection on these sensations. These ideas can be of the simple sort or compounded. "Simple ideas" are real and completely evident when I perceive them (implying that if you lack the proper receptive apparatus, you cannot know the outside world). "Complex ideas" are combinations of simple ideas bundled together in my mind; complex ideas exist only in my mind and not in reality.

There is a real "out there." Qualities in the "out there" are what make me form the idea in my mind. There are two types of qualities: 1) primary--the fundamental "what's really there" (e.g. hard or soft, etc.) and 2) secondary--which are combinations of qualities (e.g., heat explained as motion). Primary qualities are inseparable from bodies whereas secondary qualities are not in the object itself (and thus are not real) but arise out of a combination of primary qualities and it is these that have an effect on us. In other words, these combinations are important because they produce smell, sight, etc. Locke, at this point, is not addressing the problem of the external world using the same method

as Descartes. Locke believes (assumes) that the real "out there" is producing secondary qualities which cause "simple ideas" in his mind on which he either senses or reflects. The distinctions Locke makes concerning the knowledge of the "out there" could be illustrated as follows:

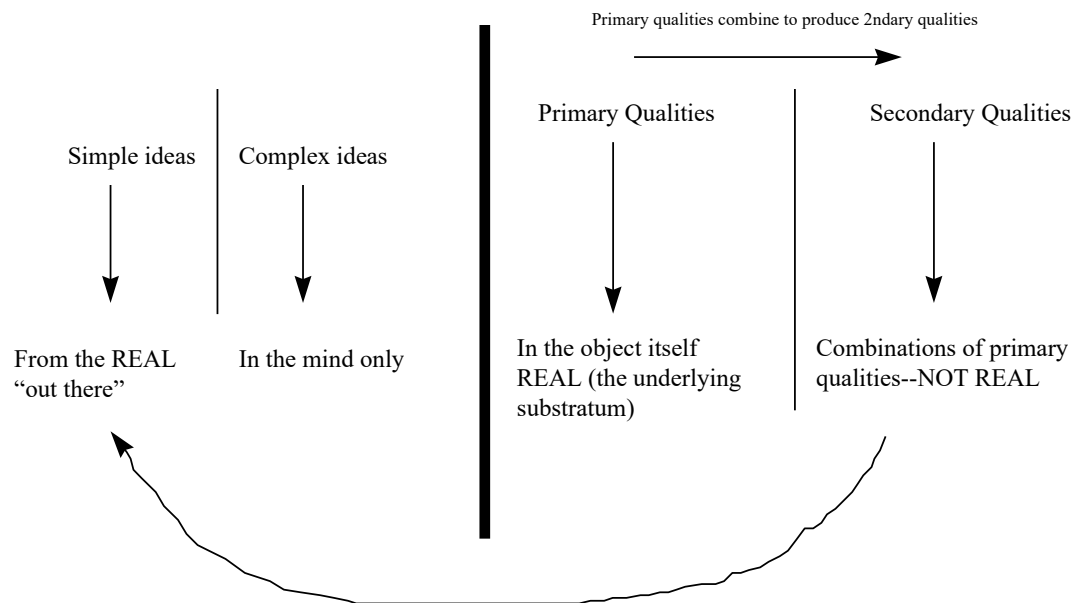


Diagram #2:

What is surprising to observe is that in Locke's view it is the secondary qualities that are perceived though they are not real and this is the only access the perceiver has to the real substratum. What Locke describes as the underlying substratum (out there) ends up being described in amorphous terms as something like "I don't know." It's the stuff we "know not what"; similarly in modern terms we might regress down to the quark level and below and then end up describing it as: "I don't know exactly what it is."

In Locke's account of language, he holds the position that general terms apply to an example but the general term does not name the example. Though this is a bit difficult to understand, I think he argues something like this: 1) we start out with an idea of a horse that is really one particular thing; 2) then you change your idea with greater

experience and eliminate things for that picture which don't match; they drop out; 3) we make up general names that have their foundation in similarity (things in common). But only the particulars exist, not the nominal essences.

In the following passage, Locke explains his view of essence:

First, Essence may be taken for the very being of anything, whereby it is what it is. And thus the real internal but generally (in substances) unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their essence. This is the proper original signification of the word, as is evident from the formation of it; essentia, is its primary notation, signifying properly, being. And in this sense it is still used, when we speak of the essence of particular things, without giving them any name.

Secondly, The learning and disputes of the schools having been much busied about genus and species, the word essence has almost lost its primary signification: and instead of the real constitution of things, has been almost wholly applied to the artificial constitution genus and species. It is true, there is ordinarily supposed a real constitution of the sorts of things; and it is past doubt there must be some real constitution, on which any collection of simple ideas co-existing must depend. But, it being evident that things are ranked under names into sorts or species, only as they agree to certain abstract ideas, to which we have annexed those names, the essence of each genus or sort, comes to be nothing but that abstract idea which the general, or sortal (if I may have leave so to call it from sort, as I do general from genus,) name stands for. And this we shall find to be that which the word essence imports in its most familiar use.

These two sorts of essences, I suppose, may not unfitly be termed, the one the real, the other nominal essence.<sup>8</sup>

Here Locke argues that one sort of essence, the *real* essence, is the "very being of anything, whereby it is what it is."<sup>9</sup> This sense of essence is real but unclear to the perceiver and since we do not know exactly what the real constitution is, our knowledge about the *real* essence could always be revised. Locke asserts that the *nominal* sense of essence is often used in a confused way. It is often used, in Locke's estimation, to signify

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 527.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 527

real essences instead of realizing *nominal* essences as at best complex ideas which exist only in the mind. It seems general terms fit this description of what *nominal* essences are. This can be pictured in the following way:

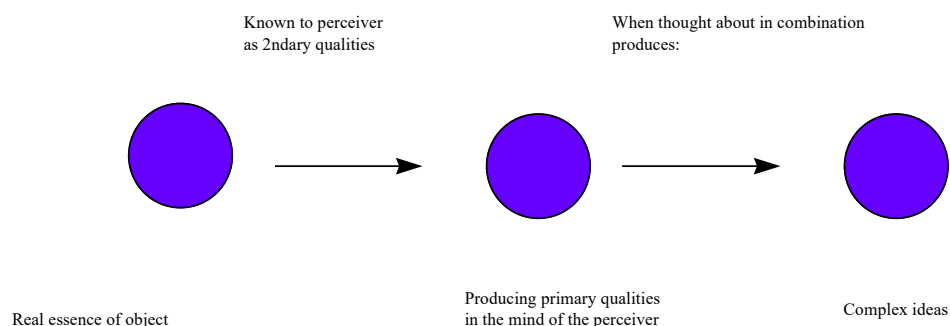


Diagram #3

Locke thought there were differing levels of certainty and clear limits on what we know. There was intuitive certainty (which he conceived as the highest certainty) upon which we know of our own existence or perhaps, one idea is not another. The next lower level, demonstrative certainty, depends on intuitive certainty and the things we know by deduction (from intuitive knowledge). Locke acknowledges that in especially long arguments we can mistakes even here. Then there is sensitive knowledge. This sensitive knowledge comes from a real world apart from us which we cannot prove. So sensitive knowledge is a weaker form of knowledge but knowledge nonetheless.

This is a step back from the certainty that Descartes wanted to establish with respect to our knowledge of the outside world. It, too, believes there is a real "out there," but seems to say we only know it through the secondary qualities which (arguably) are in some way (nominally) related to the essence of the sensible object. We will soon see

where David Hume takes this view.

### Locke's Ethics

Locke reveals something of his ethical views when he inquires into man's liberty which is described as "the power to act or not to act, according as the minds directs."<sup>10</sup> Locke's view is that the question of freedom of will is unintelligible; rather he views the question of liberty or power as related to agents. He argues further that the power of the agent to suspend or hold back his desires allows a man to consider and make choices. This choice, according to Locke, is affected by the "uneasiness" of the agent in selecting either opportunity. We are instructed by Locke, in this somewhat difficult passage, as to how he views the effect of "uneasiness" and its consequence on man's freedom:

There being in us a great many uneasinesses, always soliciting and ready to determine the will, it is natural as I have said, that the greatest and most pressing should determine the will to the next action; and so it does for the most part, but not always. For, the mind having in most cases, as is evident in experience, a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires; and so all, one after another; is at liberty to consider the object of them, examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty man has; and from the not using of it right comes all that variety of mistakes, errors and faults which we run into the conduct of our lives, and our endeavors after happiness. . . This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that which is (as I think improperly) called free-will. For, during action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge of the good or evil of what we are going to do; and when, upon due examination, we have judged, we have done our duty, all that we can, or ought to do, in pursuit of our happiness; and it is not a fault, but a perfection of our nature, to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair examination."<sup>11</sup>

This passage is not particularly revealing as to whether Locke's guiding ethical principle is teleological or deontological. However, it indicates, in Locke's view, that man's

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 508.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p. 508.

freedom to exercise moral judgment lies in his power to suspend action and judge his behavior in advance. Thus, he clearly holds individuals responsible for their acts as agents, reminiscent of Descartes' view.

### Section III: David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. A rather bright fellow, he finished his education at Edinburgh University at age fifteen and became a law student. However, he disliked law and began doing independent research on certain philosophical problems. In 1739 he published *Treatise of Human Nature* which met with little enthusiasm from the public. Later (1748) he wrote what he thought was a popular introduction to the Treatise which he entitled *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. In 1751 he published his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*; posthumously his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was published in 1776. His contribution to the history of ideas is enormous--it was Immanuel Kant that said it was Hume who awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers.

### Hume's Epistemology

There are two possible interpretations of Hume's epistemology. One is that experience is the ground of knowledge and the other is that Hume's position was that of skeptic (of all knowledge). I think it's fair to say that Hume was an epistemological empiricist because he explicitly rejected epistemic rationalism and held that all our ideas are derived from impressions from our senses or inner feelings. To be sure his views can imply a very deep skeptical attitude which some have argued leads to solipsism; however, Hume based his empiricism on **a natural inclination** to trust the deliverances of his senses. This view can be seen in the following passage:

Thus the first philosophical objection to the evidence of sense to the opinion of external existence consists in this, that such an opinion, if rested on natural instinct, is contrary to reason, and if referred to reason, is contrary to natural instinct and at the same time carries no rational evidence with it, to convince an impartial enquirer. The second objection goes farther, and represents this opinion as contrary to reason: at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind and not the object. Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown inexplicable something, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no skeptic will think it worthwhile to contend against it.<sup>12</sup>

His point is that natural instinct takes over when reason fails. He brings this point up again when he discusses Pyrrhonian skepticism.

But a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. . . Nature is always too strong for principle.<sup>13</sup>

Pyrrho (circa 360 BC—c. 272 BC), to whom Hume refers, is a fountainhead of Greek skepticism. Though we know his teachings mainly through Timon of Phlius, Pyrrho is reputed to hold that the real nature of things can never be truly comprehended and hence objective knowledge is impossible to attain. He taught, as would Hume, that the wise person, in light of this situation, would suspend judgment indefinitely.

#### Hume's Metaphysics

Hume used the term "impressions" to mean ideas which we have in our mind as a result of direct sense data and reflection. "Ideas" for Hume were representations of our

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<sup>12</sup>David Hume, "Enquiry into Human Understanding," in *Classics in Western Thought*. p. 780.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 782.

imagination and memory much like Locke's complex ideas. But unlike Locke, he held the position that since our fund of information consists of these things and only these things, then we cannot know how accurate these impressions are to the real world. The result of this is quite a severe metaphysical skepticism.

Hume held the position that simple ideas in his mind were derived from a "corresponding impression." Thus, all our thinking is a matter of manipulating these various impressions contained in ideas. This analysis has the effect of limiting the mind's capacity to merely thinking within realm of experience and makes entertaining propositions which could not be analyzed into constituent impressions meaningless. From this view of the limitation of the mind's capacity to think about certain things, we can see the roots of logical positivism as later exemplified by the Vienna Circle of philosophers. Their view held that talk about God (God-talk) as well as metaphysical truths were neither true nor false; instead, they were literally meaningless.

#### Hume's Ethics

For Hume, morality is not a matter of fact that one can infer from experience. Central to Hume's theory of moral judgments is that they are expressions of feeling and not rationality. You might call it a moral theory of sentiment; one can see in a rather straightforward way how subjectivism follows. Hume's ethic was most probably entailed in his philosophy of mind where he found sentiment as the only explanation for the idea of vice. He also felt that one's passions and feelings do influence behavior. Hume is making a sharp distinction between judgments of fact and judgments of value and on this account, it appears to be more a description about how morality actually does operate than how it should.

Hume believed that "reason" alone cannot decide moral questions largely because they do not actually prevent actions. The point is that our passions are a stronger force in affecting actions than reason could ever be and therefore reason cannot be the explanation behind moral theory.

#### Section IV: Immanuel Kant

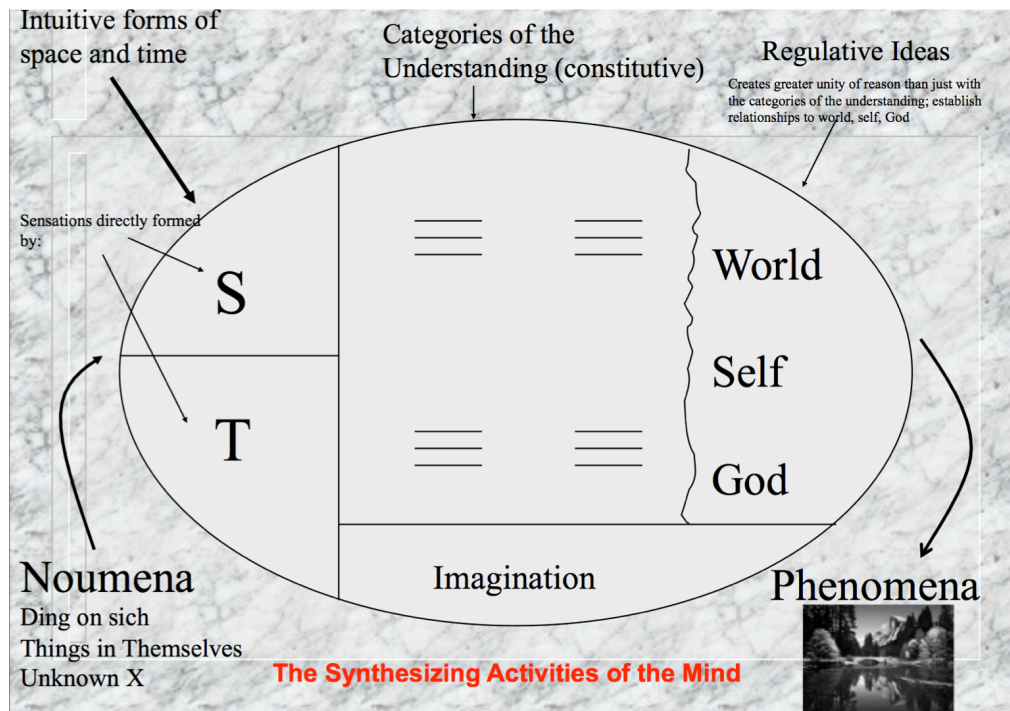
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), son of a saddler and Scottish immigrant, grew up in a remote province of East Prussia. Through the influence of his Lutheran pastor, he was able to obtain an education. As he advanced in age and education, his interest changed from theology to mathematics and physics. He became a private tutor and his interests expanded to include moral philosophy and metaphysics. Kant, a prolific author, is probably best known for three Critiques that he wrote and they are: *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Critique of Judgment*. Perhaps the best way to understand Kant's use of the term "critique" in his titles is to understand it to mean *analysis*.

#### Kant's Epistemology

Kant held the position that there was an *a priori* dimension to knowledge. The form of all knowledge is independent of experience. But he also held that the content or "stuff" of knowledge comes via the senses (as did the empiricists). He believed the structure of knowledge is imparted by the mind. That is, the mind orders our experience through its various "categories." These concepts in the mind do not come from experience but rather are read into experience. Kant claimed his insight was a Copernican revolution in the sense that no longer was it viewed that the mind conforms to things, but rather things conform to the mind. The only role these categories can play

is to give knowledge of possible experience. This synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, however, still leads to a form of agnosticism (or more accurately, anti-realism) with respect to knowledge of real objects (or essences). This is because Kant held that the categories should not be assumed to be applicable other than to sensible input in space and time; arguably, in effect, he asserted that in some sense we create reality—it is not independent of us. In another sense Kant seems to say there is an "out there" but claims that one could never know the nature of the "out there." To bolster this view, Kant argued that when we do try to apply the categories to those things in themselves (reality) we end up in antimony. Such a view implies that any theory of knowledge is really a theory of appearances (to me) and not a theory about knowledge of things in themselves (real essences).

See diagram below for a way to visualize Kant's epistemic scheme:



Kant's Metaphysics

Kant's epistemology led inevitably to complete skepticism concerning the nature of reality (though he didn't deny its existence) along with God, freedom, and immortality. All of these concepts, according to Kant, transcend human experience and are theoretically dismissed.

### Kant's Ethics

It is a challenge even to attempt to compress Kant's elaborate ethical system. Let me begin by saying Kant saw his theoretical agnosticism and metaphysical skepticism as a necessary step to establish the real ground for theistic belief and moral duty--practical reason. What I mean by that is that Kant's analysis of the limits and capacities of human knowledge left him with a knowledge of the phenomena (thing to me) but not a knowledge of the noumena (thing in itself). Instead, Kant saw God, freedom, and immortality not as real objects of knowledge, but rather as *necessary postulates* for the moral life. Though we could not know them through theoretical speculation we need them to do moral philosophy.

Kant takes a different approach from his predecessors with his moral theory. The following passage is an example of its novelty and its complexity.

A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself. When it is considered in itself, then it is to be esteemed very much higher than anything which it might ever bring about merely in order to favor some inclination, or even the sum total of all inclinations.<sup>14</sup>

This quote reflects the deontological rather than the teleological nature of Kant's moral theory. However, though Kant thought of himself as a Christian in some sense, Kant's

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<sup>14</sup>Immanuel Kant, "Grounding for the Metaphysical of Morals" in *Classics of Western Philosophy*. p. 929.

theory is **not** a paradigm for biblical Christians; Kant's moral theory wasn't a response to a loving and moral God, rather it was a response to moral intuitions which found its ground in reason. Kant held that the key principle in moral discernment is asking the question: can this action be permissible for anyone in my situation (an ethical theory of obligation)? This desire to universalize the maxim is called the Categorical Imperative (a directive saying what ought to be done from the perspective of pure reason alone) and is understood in contrast to Hypothetical Imperative. The hypothetical imperative is what one follows when one's maxim presumes a "material end," dependent on contingent inclinations, like obtaining something in order to feel happy, which I take to be a teleological view of ethics. Humans, in Kant's view, have the capacity to act in the face of the conflict between inclinations and moral reason (the structure of temptation). For Kant, moral law needs to be obeyed for its own sake with reason providing the framework rather than the content of the moral law.

### Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper was to survey some key philosophers of the Modern period and to give us some insight into the underpinnings of the Postmodern movement. In retrospect we can note that of these philosophers I surveyed, all but Hume professed belief in God though there is considerable difference of opinion on how that belief originates and is sustained. Descartes is a classic representative of the Rationalistic tradition in epistemology while Locke exemplifies a mainly Empiricist epistemology. Hume, by contrast, has a more radical brand of empirical epistemology (than Locke), which is arguably pragmatic, and strands of serious skeptical thought also emerge in his work. Kant takes Hume's skeptical "insights," which reportedly awakened him from his

dogmatic slumbers, to raze any theory of knowledge that pretends to deliver a knowledge of the thing-in-itself. Indeed, Kant seems to hold the view that our theories of knowledge are really at best a theory of "appearances to me" that are structured by categories in our minds. Such a view holds that the mind, in some sense, is not a passive receptor; it creates a "reality of appearances" rather than discovers it.

The methodological initiative started by Descartes' rejection of Medieval authority and his attempts to establish knowledge on "reason" and experience alone was a major break with the past. But Locke, Hume, and Kant pushed that method to its logical conclusion and ended up disengaging appearances (the thing to them) and ultimate reality (the thing in-itself). Without a knowledge of the real to compare their "appearances," each person's (or communities') version of "appearances" is equally "valid" or "invalid." Such a view lies at the center of conceptual relativism and this conclusion has provided much grist for the mills of a Postmodernism view that sees Reason as deceptively hiding the "knower's" will to power. It is also thought that this view of knowledge provides a certain epistemic humility (which is really epistemic poverty), a humility that grants permission to create ethical theory subject to one's own fancied tastes.

With regard to the moral theories of Hume and Kant, we find their foundations cut off from theoretical support. Hume adopts a moral theory case based on sentiment; Kant makes his case based on the necessity of practical reason--one must postulate God and other metaphysical notions in order to do morality. Instead of axiology (ethics, aesthetics, and values) existing or subsisting independent of our minds in the mind of God eternally, axiology becomes a matter of our own "creativity." This scenario amounts to a metanarrative about the history of ideas (ironically, metanarratives are rejected by

Postmodernism) and that move that permits ethical relativism—another shibboleth to most who hold to Postmodernism and many of the intellectual elite of Western civilization.

Theists have responded to these skeptical conclusions by pointing out agnosticism about the real is a disguised claim about the real and is therefore self-referentially incoherent. On the positive side, more recently the theists have typically constructed their epistemologies in one of two general ways. The evidentialists among us think that there is sufficient evidence to justify belief in God and some knowledge of the real world while, by way of contrast, the presuppositionalists among us hold to a modified form of Cartesian foundationalism with less restriction for what counts as foundational beliefs and with less certainty in results. Each approach has its critics and supporters, but settling that is for another day and another paper.

In closing, I want to say that the thing to see about the nature (and legacy) of Modernism is that it must be understood as having at least *two* important currents. One current is characterized by a search for rational certainty about the external world from a restrictive foundation of indubitable ideas—its progeny exists today in a greatly modified form. The other, more skeptical current of the Modern period leads to the conclusion that no such project can be accomplished. But if this two-current view of the Modern period is factually the case, it makes no sense to think of the Modern period as homogeneous and we should refrain from speaking as if it were. In light of that it would be more accurate to say that some Postmodern beliefs have their most recent roots *in the skeptical current of the Modern period* and that they are reacting to another current in the Modern period—the *Cartesian project*. Further, in view of this analysis, I would say that it is a

mistake to "appreciate the epistemic humility of the post moderns and reject the arrogance of the Moderns"—it's just more complicated than that. If my view is correct, the epistemic humility of the post moderns is really epistemic poverty and the arrogance of the Cartesian project is not fairly assigned to its more recent and greatly modified progeny. True, there are religious AND non-religious Cartesians among us who still suffer from its bequeathed anxieties (motivated, no doubt, to avoid sliding on the slippery slope of skepticism or overly encouraged by the progress of science), but this is where educated evangelicals can minister both grace and truth to their colleagues and to outsiders.

James A. Cook, Louisville, CO, February 5, 1998.