

Notes (from 2009) on modern philosophy<sup>1</sup>

By Chris Wright

[See also [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)]

Reading *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant*, by Etienne Gilson and Thomas Langan (1968). A 500-page tome.

The human mind, constantly classifying and ordering and associating things to one another. Ceaselessly, unconsciously and consciously, in the very structures of its physical perception as well as in the ways it interprets that perception, the stories it tells itself constantly, explicitly in philosophy and science and implicitly in common sense and ordinary language—just a never-ending *ordering, classifying, naming, a boxing-in* of all the data that come to it into thousands, millions of boxes, some large and some small, and then shunting some aside perhaps for later use while keeping others nearer the front of the mind because of their practicality. The compulsion to *associate*: think of Francis Bacon’s tripartite division of the mind into memory, imagination, and reason, corresponding to his tripartite division of the sciences into history (natural and civil), poetry (narrative, representative, or allusive), and philosophy (divine, natural, or human). Memory = history; imagination = poetry; reason = philosophy. The child’s urge to name, to associate, to make connections, to make everything *neat*, so as to gain power over the world. The child’s mind is the philosopher’s.

Bacon was wrong that induction is the proper method of science—that one simply observes, classifies “without presuppositions,” then extrapolates regularities and laws from these observations, then further reduces these to more general laws, and so on—but his mistake was virtually inevitable in one who was reacting against the scholastic tradition. Scholasticism placed far too much emphasis on sterile rationalism, deduction-spinning, concept-spinning without regard to experience; Bacon proselytized for an empiricist philosophy. It would have been contrary to the dialectical tendencies of historical and mental evolution for Bacon to have put forward a model akin to the modern deductive-nomological one, since this one is not as far removed from scholastic rationalism as his empiricism was. Affirmation, negation, negation of the negation. That’s the natural trajectory of the mind and behavior, whether in an individual’s or in society’s history. Why? Because the mind operates through the positing of contrasts, through differentiation. The ubiquity of “binary oppositions” (e.g., light/dark, good/bad) is essentially related to the dialectic: the *oppositions* manifest the mind’s nature in a static, conceptual, atemporal way, while the *dialectic* manifests the mind’s nature in a dynamic, temporal way. And the reason why the negation of the negation often seems to take the form of a synthesis of the two earlier stages is that the mind remembers or retains them both and hence cannot just return to the initial stage but has

---

<sup>1</sup> [These are notes from my journal, therefore unacademic in style.]

to effect a reconciliation. Both stages are false in their own way; but since they are opposites, the only direction to go is toward the middle.

Thomas Hobbes's crude reduction of life to mechanics, machinery, "the motion of limbs," has a contemporary parallel in Daniel Dennett's stupid reduction of the mind to a lot of software programs or whatever.

Descartes wanted "to provide science with a notion of matter in which nothing would resist a purely mechanical explanation. In this sense, the main object of the six *Meditations* is to establish that matter is nothing but geometrical extension, motion itself being a mere mode of extension." ("In science proper, this resulted in a mechanicism without dynamics.") Matter = extension. Interesting. As I wrote months ago, Newton rejected that, or anyway he rejected mechanicism and thus, according to Chomsky, made the idea of matter incoherent. (Action at a distance! That damned action-at-a-distance!)

Descartes had left his followers a very grave problem to solve: If mind and body are really distinct, how can they unite to form the substantial unity of man? More generally, if no immaterial elements such as forms are included in the structure of physical beings, how can there be any communication between these two radically separated substances, extension and thought? To these two problems, a third one was soon to be added. According to Descartes, mind and body are really distinct because they can be conceived apart, but if the same principle is applied to any two substances, since they can be conceived apart, it will become difficult to imagine how one of them can communicate with any other one. This difficulty became known as the problem of the "communication of substances."

And so the adventure began, the centuries-long quest to come to terms with Cartesianism. Some philosophers would call it a misadventure, a sort of philosophical detour. I don't entirely agree: I think Descartes articulated dualisms that had been obscurely implicit in philosophy for millennia, and eventually we were going to have to settle accounts with these dualisms. Every major culture obscurely recognizes dualisms between mind and body, inner and outer, spirit and matter, subjectivity and objectivity, etc. Descartes simply formulated them with unprecedented clarity.

He also did a philosophical service by clearing the way for skepticism, for instance through his first rule of method, that "one should accept in judgments nothing more than what is presented to the mind so clearly and distinctly that there is no occasion to doubt it." An "immediate consequence" of this is that "we must never attribute to any thing what is not clearly and distinctly included in its notion." It's easy to see how these rules could lead to Hume's skepticism.

For Cartesians, clear and distinct ideas are the simplest elements of thought, from which all knowledge can be derived *a priori* by way of deductive rules. One version of rationalism. We'll see this principle being followed by Spinoza and Leibniz.

*"All we know are our own representations, and of these, only our ideas can be considered true and objective. Descartes has shown that only our clear and distinct ideas possess internal grounds for being held as representative of something; as for all the other affections in the soul, all the confused representations, be they sensations, dreams, imaginings...they surely exist in the soul, but what possible ground is there for affirming that they reveal something true about things lying outside consciousness?"* Cartesian skepticism, ancient skepticism.

Said more concisely, the question—or one of them—is how we can know anything outside ourselves if we immediately know only ourselves. Descartes invokes God's perfect nature: he wouldn't *deceive* us, would he?! Malebranche relies on the Bible: it says there that things exist in an extended world, so, well, they must thus exist. The Bible doesn't lie, after all. In fact, we don't see bodies in themselves at all; when I see a book I am really just having the "idea" of extension presented to my spirit in a particular and sensory way by means of the "movement" of the impression (or "sentiment") of color. It is the universal and objective idea of extension that allows me to see something; only by participating in, or (as I would say) instantiating, the "idea"<sup>2</sup> of extension are things perceivable. And this idea, an aspect of universal Reason, has been given to us by God and is a part of him. Thus, the things we see in the world have a dual nature: they are particular (this is the bare sensory impression or "sentiment") but they also participate in the divine idea, as do we—without which participation they could not have the element of objectivity and universality, of *truth*, that allows other people to see them in the way I do. —All this is rather Kantian. It also paves the way for Spinoza's pantheism, especially when you add Malebranche's occasionalism (which is sort of implicit in this analysis; see the next paragraph).

Anyway, it's clear then that Malebranche's answer to the question above isn't as simplistic as Descartes's. It involves (1) God's being the cause of the "movements of knowledge and feeling in my soul" (part of which causation is precisely our possession of universal Reason, our participation in the divine idea), (2) the Bible's revelation that objects actually do exist, and (3) the conclusion that God must be arranging things in these objects in the ways that appear to me (through sensations, etc.), because, after all, he's causing movements in my soul, so it only makes sense that he would cause corresponding movements in the objects. This is the doctrine of occasionalism. One way to express it is: "My body and my spirit are distinct and cannot interact. But God, author of the movements of both, can, as part of the economy of creation, move my

---

<sup>2</sup> The term "idea" is unfortunate, since what Malebranche really means is surely something like "structure," or "perceptual structure" (to cognitivize it and put it in modern terminology).

body and my spirit simultaneously so that the movements of the one will correspond perfectly with the affections of the other.” In fact, substances in nature that seem to interact causally don’t really do so: God coordinates them in such a way that the relation of cause and effect *appears* to hold between them.

Whatever. I’ll pass over the confusions. From all this it’s also easy to see Berkeley’s idealism just around the corner. If we have no contact with objects in themselves, we might as well jettison the whole idea of them! We don’t need them.

Here’s a rather obvious resolution of Zeno’s paradox I hadn’t considered: “The difficulty ‘How can one cross an infinite number of points in a finite time?’ results from an illusion. Since both time and space are divisible to infinity, we actually cross an infinite number of parts of space in an infinite number of parts of time, which is not absurd.” Actually, this isn’t quite the same thing as the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise.

Pascal, forerunner of Kierkegaard and existentialism. He was the first great modern philosopher to really understand Christianity; Kierkegaard was the second.

Spinoza resolves some of the Cartesian problems by declaring that there is only one substance. So there is no problem of communication between mind and matter, because thought and extension are simply two attributes of the same substance. And there is no problem of communication between substances in nature because every thing is a mode of one universal substance. Here’s a passage from the internet on Spinoza’s notion of substance:

For Spinoza, there is only one substance, the existence of which is demonstrated by a version of the ontological argument, which is thought of as being both God and Nature. It is an unending controversy whether Spinoza was a pantheist, or an atheist who called nature ‘God’ because it was the one true substance and existed necessarily. Everything else is a mode of this one substance. The view is analogous to a claim that the universe is space-time as a whole, with matter as distortions in it. If this were true, material objects would be modes of space-time. The analogy would be more exact if one also thought of the laws of nature as equivalent to the divine intellect immanent in nature. Spinoza’s view [stresses the following two definitions of ‘substance’: (1) “being ontologically basic—substances are the things from which everything else is made or by which it is metaphysically sustained; (2) being, at least compared to other things, relatively independent and durable, and, perhaps, absolutely so.”] Nothing but the universe as a whole meets these criteria fully.

Spinoza has always fascinated me, perhaps, on some level, more than any other thinker (except *possibly* Kant and Hegel). He challenges me: I barely understand him at all. But I always feel as though his philosophy is unfathomably deep, as though Truth is buried in it somewhere. He's like a European Buddha-Philosopher.

On the other hand, I often think he's the victim of conceptual confusions.

"Leibniz shared Descartes's idealist vocation and mathematicist prejudices: he set out in the search of Truth in the fair form of a philosophy that would proceed deductively from clear and distinct principles supposed somehow to enfold in their logical expression the very fountainhead of Being itself. ...Leibniz's philosophy demands that everything be understood in terms of the 'first truths.'" And the most important first truth is the principle of identity, from which he constructs his entire philosophy. *A is A*. "Identity is that exact coincidence of subject with predicate which alone is absolutely necessary. Identity, necessity, the absolute—these are three ways of expressing the same reality; they are the properties of the clear and distinct truth." To know absolutely—"clearly and distinctly"—is to know what *has* to be, and what has to be is the principle of identity. It has to be because it is its own ground: a judgment of identity needs no more explanation.

"Leibniz made an important addition to Cartesian lore when he decided he had discovered why a truly clear and distinct idea is something divine, an absolute criterion by which the reality and intelligibility of all things are to be measured. This is because a clear and distinct idea has to be a judgment of identity, and a judgment of identity answers perfectly the question of 'sufficient reason': it is its own explanation because what it announces is simply one with itself. The judgment of identity manifests the ultimate, the divine reality, because it states with perfect simplicity that the subject is what it is. Ultimately, every true judgment then must be reducible to a judgment of identity, if it is true, if what it states is real, for that is just what it means to be *real, to be one with oneself perfectly*." Every true judgment has to be reducible to a tautology. The only reason there seem to be contingent truths for us is that we don't know enough, we aren't God. But if we were God we would see the *reason* for the connection between, for example, gold and its color yellow, which would make the judgment "gold is yellow" (or some such one) necessary, an expression of gold's identity with itself. —All this reminds me of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*.

"To know something necessarily—i.e., absolutely—is to know its *reason* for existing; to know its reason for existing is to know the thing in its essence, so that the essential connection of all the predicates...is reducible to an essential expression of what the thing itself is."

From this source [writes Leibniz] springs immediately the received axiom that nothing is without a reason, or that no effect is without a cause. Otherwise there might be a truth which could not be proved *a priori*, or

which would not be resolved into identical truths; but that is contrary to the nature of truth, which is always, either expressly or implicitly, identical.

The authors comment: “No more dramatic reduction of the order of being to the order of logic can be imagined. The ‘cause’ of anything is its ‘reason,’ i.e., its essential intelligibility—the fact that its entire destiny can be reduced to a logical whole...” At any rate, if every truth can be proved *a priori*, everything is necessary. This was Spinoza’s conclusion too, but his reasoning was different. Leibniz even agrees with him about the ultimate “sufficient reason” for everything, the reason “why there is something rather than nothing”: it has to be a self-caused substance (otherwise there would be an infinite regress of external causes), a substance which causes itself and everything else. And what is this self-caused substance? Why, God, of course! God encompasses the world, and every thing in process that we see has its place in the unity of the totality, “the necessity and reality of which is evident *to any finite mind that has been led to discover within itself the ultimate sense of its own innate ideas*. We shall see that this is the key to Leibniz’s conception of how we should live our lives.” Let me take a wild guess: it has a lot in common with Spinoza’s conception, i.e., with the conception of every philosopher in history (except Nietzsche and some Christians).

Time and space are not real, he argues. They are relations of “extrinsic denomination,” whatever that means, due only to the limitations of our finite point of view.

As for the problem of the mind/body dualism—which generalizes to that of how *any* two particular substances can interact (which interaction would entail something passing over from one into the other, which is inconceivable because “it would violate the unity and integrity of each and leave them other than they are”)—Leibniz introduces his famous doctrine of pre-established harmony. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as causation; what appears to be causation is in fact *concomitance*. God has arranged it from the beginning so that everything that happens in the mind corresponds to everything that happens in the body. –Um, I’m sorry dude, but Spinoza wins on this one. First of all, he anticipated a sophisticated [modern mind-brain identity theory](#), and secondly, his notion of a universal substance obviated the need to have recourse to any such absurd idea as occasionalism or pre-established harmony.

So, for Leibniz, every substance is a little world closed in upon itself. For it to open out onto other substances is both unnecessary (because of pre-established harmony) and impossible (because of the self-sufficient nature of substance). This Leibnizian atomism is different from the materialistic atomism of the ancients and others in that it rejects mechanistic efficient causation in favor of pre-established harmony: each monad reflects all the others in a sort of ‘spiritual’ way. Thus Leibniz also rejects Descartes’s division of the world into the mechanical-material sphere and

the spiritual, 'alive' sphere. –I've never understood the monads. The life of each one— (yes, monads have a "life," because among the substances they all reflect are macrocosmic living ones like humans and plants)—consists in some degree of *perception* and *appetition*. "The monad as representative of the whole universe is *perceptive*, while the monad considered as an individual realizing itself in a unified way is *appetitive*." Okay. That makes about as much sense as any of this.<sup>3</sup>

Leibniz discovered the unconscious. Yes. He understood that we are not conscious of the majority of representations in our mind. All monads, all substances— simple (atoms) and complex (e.g., plants)—have perceptions, according to Leibniz, but most are dim, unconscious; only a *fraction* of *human* perceptions are truly conscious. Remember Nietzsche's tribute to Leibniz in *The Gay Science*? "...Leibniz's incomparable insight that has been vindicated not only against Descartes but also against everyone who had philosophized before him—that consciousness is merely an *accidens* of the power of representation and *not* its necessary and essential attribute..."

Interesting observation: "The 'Copernican revolution' begins not with Kant, but with Descartes." In a way, that seems obviously true. Descartes's emphasis on consciousness, on the subject, on innate ideas, etc. Consciousness was no longer dependent on experience; experience depended on the structure of consciousness. Kant really just brought the "revolution" to its highest point. –But no, Kant's revolution consisted in "putting man in his place," by drawing the boundaries of reason. Man can't have absolute knowledge. This is fundamentally contrary to Descartes. Cartesian rationalism—which, in a way, is also Kant's—shouldn't really be called a Copernican revolution; it's more of a Ptolemaic counterrevolution, since it puts man at the center of the world, or at least of *his* world. Kant accepts this Cartesian innovation while adding his own properly Copernican element, his humbling of man.

Hitherto I hadn't known much about Christian Wolff besides the fact that Karl Marx had contempt for him, saying he was basically Germany's Bentham. And so he was. The same shallow, derivative, prolific tediousness.

The Cambridge Platonists. (Middle of the 1600s.) Anti-Puritans. Love, generosity, faith, humility, hope. The Neo-Platonic spirit (they'd all read Plotinus): "the emphasis on the unity of reality radiating downward from the highest principle; the suggestion that one should turn inward to find the presence in us of that highest principle;<sup>4</sup> the union of the practical and theoretical lives..." A Platonic opposition to Bacon's and Hobbes's materialism. They condemn the attempt to derive the higher from the lower— soul from matter, idea from material sensation, life from mechanism. Impossible! they say. Instead, they turn materialism upside down: there is spirit in everything, a world-

---

<sup>3</sup> Actually, it does make *some* sense. If you translate these old metaphysical philosophies into modern scientific language, they're sort of understandable.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the Hindu doctrine of Atman and Brahman. Also, of course, Augustine, Malebranche, et al.

soul that directs everything. (Cf. Leibniz's rejection of Descartes's mechanistic materialism. Spiritual, living monads.) Needless to say, they didn't have much influence.

With Locke begins the modern tradition of criticism, or critical epistemology (which eventually morphed into the philosophy of language and, on the European continent, phenomenology), the tradition that opposes the construction of great metaphysical edifices towering above reality. Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, the analytic philosophers, and on up to the present day. On the other side are Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer. (Descartes sort of straddles both.) But Locke, true to the spirit of jolly old England, rebels against the immense Baroque rationalistic deductions from first principles;<sup>5</sup> he wants simply to look at the human understanding clearly and unpretentiously, analyze it to see how it works, where its ideas come from, and what exactly we can know.

First, of course, he rejects the idealists' clear and distinct innate ideas. His arguments are easily refuted by Leibniz—with respect to the innate part, not the clear and distinct part. Anyway, you already know what empiricism is: the *tabula rasa*, the sensations, the complex ideas built up out of sensations, and so on. Locke says that all our ideas come from either sensation or inner reflection. He divides ideas into simple and complex. The simple ones include (1) atomistic sense-data (such as the feel of cold when you touch an ice-cube), (2) atomistic reflections on the mind's own operations, (3) "qualities discovered through the cooperation of several senses, and (4) ideas derived from a cooperation of sense and reflection." Examples of (3) are extension, figure, rest and motion, qualities called "primary." (The Cartesians claimed that these qualities are actually innate ideas in us; that's why they apply to all our experiences of objects.) Category (4) includes existence, unity, power, succession, pleasure and pain. These qualities are "suggested" by everything we perceive within us and outside us.

Then the mind *combines, compares, and separates* the simple ideas to form complex ones, which fall into the three categories of *substances, modes, and relations*. The idea of substance is invented by the imagination to give body to the accustomed "going constantly together" of a number of simple ideas. "Not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some *substratum* wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *substance*." Hume essentially borrows his account from Locke.

Locke argues that we cannot know the real essences of things, because no complex idea fabricated out of the atoms of sensation, discrete and external, could ever actually be the thing itself.

---

<sup>5</sup> There's a notable similarity of spirit in Baroque architecture, painting, music, sculpture, and philosophy.



As for causation, Locke argues that it is only through the inner experience of causing our own acts that we have a clear grasp of the principle and can apply it to the external world. "The simple ideas we have of bodies, derived from sensation, yield no experience of bodily motion actually beginning." All we can see from sensation is that bodies have the power to receive change, as when a billiard ball strikes another; we never actually see the beginning of a series of changes. Bodies have the passive power of being able to receive change, but do they have an active power? Well, in our inner life we encounter the active power of the will. We then apply the principle to external causation, attributing to bodies a comparable active power. You can see here the direction in which Hume will take this analysis: he'll "jump on the suggestion that cause is traceable to mental conditions and suggest that it is merely the imagination's way of structuring experience." You can also see the potential for a rationalist analysis, according to which the mind furnishes "objectively valid" ideas from which experience is constructed.

Descartes's explanation of personal identity is in terms of the spiritual substance. Locke rejects substance dualism—he even suggests that man *could*, perhaps, be nothing but matter endowed with the power of thinking, although he decides that *probably* thought is immaterial—so he has to come up with a different explanation of personal identity. He finds it in memory: identity extends as far as memory does.

The main purpose of Locke's *magnum opus* is to inquire into the nature of knowledge. It isn't to be found on the level of the ideas taken in isolation, but in the perception of connections between them. He anticipates the transcendental idealists in pointing to the assembling activity of the spirit as that which gives rise to knowledge. This is sort of ironic. "Locke's psychologism is father to the more fundamental transcendentalism of Kant." Locke even admits there is a lot that the human mind is incapable of understanding, for instance matter, motion, and mind itself. This, too, is distinctly un-empiricistic of him.

True knowledge, in the full sense of the word, begins only with the complex ideas, but the simple ideas are valid as far as they go, since they just represent what they represent. They can't be "wrong." Complex ideas Locke divides into mathematical and moral ones, and those relating to natural substances. Ideas in the first category (math/morals)—or, rather, propositions made from these ideas—don't refer to real objects but only to the ideas themselves, or to their mutual compatibility. So, in a way, mathematical and moral truths are true of concrete things too, simply because the latter, in not being denoted by the former, cannot contradict them. "It doesn't matter whether there really is any such thing as an equilateral triangle in the world; the principles concerning equilateral triangles will be true." Again, Locke is close to rationalism. The same applies to moral truths: if it's true in speculation that murder deserves death, then it's true with respect to a concrete act of murder. (Locke doesn't really explain how it's possible that complex ideas do manage to have an applicability to reality.)

Locke didn't like Descartes's deductive physics, preferring a physics of experimentation. "Science shouldn't try to meddle with the archetypes of material substances, [since they] lie without us and cannot be known in themselves." Our only contact with them is through the simple ideas, which may, after all, differ from them. Therefore, "sciences must of necessity be experimental and stop looking for absolute knowledge." In this respect, Locke is a skeptic.

Locke's vision of the science of the future has proved in one essential respect far more exact than the Cartesian prediction: Science is to be a never-ending, by nature never-satisfied quest, its conclusions always tenuous, always subject to revision as experimentation advances and experimental tools improve. Yet science can be said to acquire some truths "once and for all." Only the realistic position, which admits the possibility of a grasp of certain truth short of a perfect knowledge of being, can explain the actual evolution of a science that is neither deductive nor absolutely uncertain.

Yup. Very true.

In some ways Locke is rather Cartesian, for instance in his "anchoring our knowledge of existence in an internal intuition of our own being, completely divorced from any embarrassing questions about the existence and nature of other things." He also deductively demonstrates that God must exist: something must have created being (which I know exists from my own internal intuition), and this something is God. Lastly, he even argues that sensation does, in the end, give us knowledge adequate to practical pursuits. It isn't certain enough to found an objectively valid science, but it serves practical purposes well.

As for political philosophy: there is a natural law grounded in the will of God. The best way to approximate this natural law in societies is for government to enforce the preservation of life and property and allow people to pursue happiness. Private property grows out of the natural right of self-determination with regard to life and happiness. "What man fundamentally possesses is his own person and his own labor. In the process of acquiring what he needs, he works on the things of the earth, transforming them, mixing his labor with them, and therefore making them in some way his own." Hence the right of private property. Locke also invokes the state of nature and the social contract in the predictable ways. The main difference from Hobbes is that the people remain the ultimate possessors of power: if the government abuses its power, going beyond the mere assurance of preservation of property (which is not for its own sake—contrary to modern-day "liberals"—but for the sake of liberty and happiness), its legitimacy is forfeit, power reverts to the people, and revolution becomes just.

Newton was tremendously influential not only in science but in philosophy. In achieving the perfect marriage between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, he influenced everyone from the *philosophes* to David Hume to Kant. He proved that the proper scientific method is as follows:

From empirical observation of phenomena one rises by induction to principles expressive of the general nature of the relationships involved. Then, through the medium of a mathematical formulation of these relationships, one deduces the results one should obtain when applying these formulae to the gross phenomena of the planetary system. Whereupon one returns to empirical observation to verify the conclusions, i.e. to see if the planets showed up where they should if everything really works as projected.

“Newton is [also] one of the fathers of the favorite eighteenth-century proof for the existence of a watchmaker to explain the wonderful clockwork of the universe.”

“Out of the collisions of spiritualism and materialism, innatism and empiricism, was generated the need, if solutions to these problems were ever to be found, to plunge deeper into the workings of the human soul. And indeed the eighteenth century is the century of *psychology*.”

Almost a decade ago I took a few notes on Berkeley and Hume, but I was philosophically naïve (because untutored) back then. I won't spend much time on them now, though; I'm already well-acquainted with them. Berkeley: occasionalism. We mustn't mistake the connections in nature for causes. Ideas (which are the “objects” we perceive) can't be causes; they're inert. Only spirit, mind, has causative power. Berkeley's half-opposition to the atomism of the empiricist tradition was somewhat influential during the Enlightenment. (He stressed that the senses depend on each other, involve each other in their operations.)

Hume brings atomistic empiricism to its logical conclusions. Actually, the rationalists too (except Spinoza) were atomists, but “the inherently disintegrating nature of Hume's theory of sensation was kept in check and amply compensated in the Cartesians by the marvelous unification given the world by an infinite God. Remember how Malebranche's God could coordinate a world the individual pieces of which never could touch one another. Or think of Leibniz's miraculously harmonized clocks, so carefully kept parallel by the divine Clockmaker, who can establish them to run simultaneously without any causal connection between them.” It's the old problem of the communication of substances. Given the Cartesian assumptions about matter's being extension and extension's not implying motion but only mobility, etc.—so that things can't actively move each other—if God is taken out of the picture as the source of

all motion, Hume's theory of causation, based on *impressions* and the role of the imagination, becomes inevitable. (?) "The whole problem is translated into a quest for principles governing the 'association of ideas.'" Hume identifies three principles: resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect.

Hume's discussion of the imagination is rather complicated. I'll just try to summarize what he says about causation. Cause-and-effect is a relation between things that are *contiguous* and that are related *successively*, so that the cause always precedes the effect. (?) Hume argues that if they weren't successive, that "if one cause were co-temporary with its effect, and this effect with *its* effect, and so on, 'tis plain there would be no such thing as succession, and all objects must be co-existent." So it would seem, but I'm not sure. If I push an object, the cause appears to be simultaneous with the effect. But that does seem illogical somehow. On the other hand, if a cause is temporally prior then there must be a temporal gap between it and its effect, which is patently illogical. Or is that statement mere sophistry? Maybe there doesn't have to be a temporal gap. So is the cause "infinitesimally" prior to the effect? That just seems silly. Besides, the cause will still have ceased to act before the effect occurs, which raises the question of why the effect occurred! –Reason is inadequate to analyze causation.

Contiguity, succession, what else? *Necessary connection*.

Two objects may be contiguous and one may precede the other in time without their being considered related to one another as cause and effect. For this relationship to be in force, there must be some connection, considered in some way necessary, between the two impressions. What grounds this supposed necessity? We find a prime example of belief in causal necessity immortalized in the principle, presumed intuitively certain, that whatever begins to exist must have a cause. But is this principle really *necessary*; is it, as claimed, intuitively certain? Actually, the imagination can perfectly well separate the notion "beginning to exist" from the notion "having a cause." "The separation of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning in existence is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity; and is therefore incapable of being refuted by any reasoning from mere ideas; without which 'tis impossible to demonstrate the necessity of a cause."

After disposing of ideal necessary connections, Hume proposes that the basis for belief in causal connections is merely experience. But we can't be justified in drawing conclusions on the basis of past experience; there's no necessary reason to think that a given event will always follow another given event. "Reason can *never* show us the connexion of one object with another, tho' aided by past experience, and the

observation of their constant conjunction in all past instances.” Hence Hume’s skepticism (or one aspect of it). And the problem of induction. “The conjunction of one impression with another...can never justify the least leap beyond experience and beyond time. Science is thus reduced by empiricism, and by all those who substitute a dust of sensory impressions for the living whole of our real experience, to a play of ideas devoid of existential significance the moment it strays beyond the limits of concrete sensible verification.” The author is right to criticize empiricism in this way, but reason itself is a culprit too. Kant’s point was that reason mustn’t overstep its bounds: on the basis of pure *reason*, the necessity and the relation itself of cause and effect are inexplicable. Kant’s solution is that our minds are structured as they are below the level of conceptual reasoning, which gets all muddled and twisted in knots when it questions its foundations (among which is the principle of cause and effect). But he has in common with Hume a skepticism about how things are in themselves.

In general, Hume wants to deflate the pretensions of reason, demolish traditional metaphysics, point to the importance of *habit* in how we think, emphasize the self’s “embodiment,” show that reason is not as strictly objective or absolute as the Cartesians thought. Like his predecessors and Kant, he argues that the *imagination*, which associates ideas and makes connections between them, is essentially what constructs the world for us. (Again, irony. The difference between the old empiricists and rationalists is that the former basically think it all has to do with learning from experience, through habit or whatever, while the latter think it’s innate. But they both accept that the mind plays some role in structuring experience.<sup>6</sup>) So, for Hume, it’s the imagination that makes us think objects exist externally to us, and which gives rise to our belief in personal identity or a spiritual substance, and which persuades us of the necessity of causation. His predecessors didn’t emphasize imagination to this extent.

Hume is agnostic with respect to the debate between realism and idealism. Reason cannot adjudicate between them because there are valid arguments for both positions.

His ideas on morality were as perceptive as his ideas on everything else. What he thinks about values is similar to [what I think](#). An emphasis on subjectivism, etc. Following in the footsteps of Hutcheson.

Condillac, like Hume, wants to study human knowledge in order to know how it operates and thus avoid error. He argues that good philosophical systems are possible only if they start from observed facts. The bad ones are “abstract” or excessively

---

<sup>6</sup> Actually, it seems as though empiricists suffer from a tension between believing the mind is passive and believing it’s active. The rationalists accept its element of passiveness, but they can better account for the ways in which even the *empiricists* acknowledge it is active, i.e., they can do so without falling victim to a certain sloppiness of thinking.

deductive. He criticizes them on a number of general grounds, but one of his specific dislikes is the belief in innate ideas. Instead, he upholds sensation as the source of our ideas. Essentially his goal is to correct and complete Locke's philosophy. Locke had accepted that intellect was distinct from sense; it simply got all its material from sensation. But Condillac wants to get rid of intellect as a separate faculty altogether, claiming that it is merely *transformed sensation*. Sensations, he argues against the Cartesians, are in themselves clear and distinct, and they show unproblematically that an external world exists. Unconscious sensations (or perceptions) do not exist; Leibniz's notion of *petites perceptions* makes no sense, for unperceived perceptions are a contradiction in terms. (Cf. Sartre.) The mind, lacking reason and intellect, is wholly passive. Etc. The Stanford Encyclopedia summarizes: "Condillac was the chief exponent of a radically empiricist account of the workings of the mind that has since come to be referred to as 'sensationism.' Whereas John Locke's empiricism followed upon a rejection of innate principles and innate ideas, Condillac went further and rejected innate abilities as well. On his version of empiricism, experience not only provides us with 'ideas' or the raw materials for knowledge, it also teaches us how to focus attention, remember, imagine, abstract, judge, and reason. It forms our desires and teaches us what to will." Etc. Condillac was a precursor of associationism.

"The properly philosophical reaction to the movement represented by Locke, and partially at least caused by him, assumed a twofold form. First, there was what is now called the Scottish School of Common Sense. Its founder was Thomas Reid and he remains its greatest name. The other form of reaction borrowed its inspiration from the classics of modern Christian philosophy; it was initiated in Savoia by the now unjustly forgotten Cardinal Gerdil."

Reid was awoken from his dogmatic slumber by reading Hume's masterpiece: he decided that Hume's skepticism was the logical conclusion not only of Locke's philosophy but of Descartes's doctrine that *the immediate objects of man's knowledge are his ideas*. If you start from this premise, you're bound to get Berkeley and Hume, i.e. skepticism. The remedy, then, is to deny the premise. As he bluntly states, "No solid proof has ever been advanced of the existence of ideas." Wow. Pretty bold. Actually, by 'ideas' he only means them as they are conceived by Cartesians and Lockeans. The authors' discussion of him isn't as clear as I'd like, but what is clear is that his doctrine anticipates Kant's in some respects: for example, he disagrees with the Cartesian and Lockean doctrine that the mind is confronted with simple apprehensions containing no conceptual content which it then compares and connects and makes judgments about. Judgments cannot be separated from our immediate perceptions (or, according to the authors, sensations).<sup>7</sup> Sensations implicitly refer to objects in an external world; it isn't

---

<sup>7</sup> Reid distinguishes "*impression*, a change caused in a *passive* subject by the operation of an external cause; *sensation*, an *act* of the mind that can be distinguished from all others by this,

that we simply make an illegitimate *conclusion* that there are such objects, as Berkeley thinks. We cannot help judging, *in the very act of our perception*, that objects and substances and causes etc. exist. Reid anticipates both G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein, and he's more profound than the former:

If I say that a sensation exists [as the authors paraphrase him], I understand myself; but if you want me to say that there is an agreement between my idea of any sensation and that of existence, I find myself confused... [Cf. Wittgenstein.] "It is no less a part of the human constitution to believe the present existence of our sensations, and to believe the past existence of what we remember, than it is to believe that twice two make four... To reason against any kind of these sorts of evidence is absurd; nay, to reason for them is absurd. [Wittgenstein.] They are first principles; and such fall not within the province of reason but of common sense."

Such original judgments [argues Reid] are therefore a part of that furniture which nature has given to the human understanding... They are a part of our constitution, and all the discoveries of our reason are founded upon them. They make up what is called *the common sense of mankind*; and what is manifestly contrary to any of those first principles is what we call *absurd*... A remarkable deviation from them arising from a disorder is what we call *lunacy*; as when a man believes that he is made of glass. When a man suffers himself to be reasoned out of the principles of common sense by metaphysical arguments, we may call this *metaphysical lunacy*; which differs from the other species of the distemper in this, that it is not continued, but intermittent; it is apt to seize the patient in solitary and speculative moments; but when he enters into society common sense recovers her authority...

He wants to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, to quote Wittgenstein. He even refers to philosophers as patients! I love this guy.

The obvious difference of all this from Kant is that Reid takes sensations at face-value: he accepts that the external world "really is" as it seems, whereas Kant considers this conclusion unwarranted. In fact, Reid would judge that not only Kant but all

---

'that it has no object distinct from the act itself'; *perception* 'is most properly applied to the evidence which we have of external objects by our senses.'" I'd have to read his works to get a clear grasp of these distinctions.

contemporary scientific realists suffer from “metaphysical lunacy.” And he’d be right, in a sense. But that doesn’t mean *we’re wrong*. (In fact, scientific realism [must be right](#).)

Again, ironically, Reid does have something in common with Descartes: his rationalism.

Diderot: atheist and materialist. A self-organizing world of matter, governed by chance. He started from Condillac, who said there is no autonomous reason or intellect in the soul, only sensations and their offshoots. But if the soul is essentially sensations and shadows of sensations, then why not get rid of the soul altogether in favor of the body? Sensations are simply modifications in the body. There is no reason or intellect, only bodily sensations which become “ideas” that are then associated in various ways, a process we call reasoning. Diderot’s interlocutor objects that feeling is incompatible with matter, but Diderot rejoins, “How do you know that sensibility is incompatible with matter, since you know neither what matter is nor what sensibility is?” In fact, it may be that every piece of matter in the universe has sensations. (Leibniz.)

D’Holbach:

He reduced all phenomena, physical and moral alike, to matter and motion, motion being held to be an essential property of matter. A strict determinism prevails everywhere. [But that statement is misleading: d’Holbach wasn’t as deterministic as Hobbes, nor as “materialistic.” He thought that humans are matter with certain peculiar properties not shared by most material things.] D’Holbach wrote a number of violently anti-religious works, directed against revealed religions in general but particularly against Christianity and priests. All religions are harmful; priests should everywhere be replaced by physicians. The doctrine aims at founding a new system of ethics which consists in identifying with pleasure the fundamental motive of human actions; societies should be organized in such a way that it be the interest of each and every individual to act for the greater benefit of the social body. [From the Stanford Encyclopedia: “Ethics on Holbach’s account amounts to enlightened self-interest, vice to a failure to recognize the means to one’s interest, and moral rules to hypothetical imperatives which dictate the means to happiness or self-preservation.” Cf. Ayn Rand.] It is the business of the state to see to it that personal interest and morality coincide. The moral problem must therefore be solved by the political power; a non-religious education should train future citizens to act for the benefit of all... [He has a social contract theory of society, and he agrees with Locke about revolution etc.]

Sheer Bentham. (Or rather, Bentham was sheer d’Holbach.) Helvetius:



[Similar to d'Holbach.] What is personal to him is, if not the notion itself, this being common to all the Encyclopedists, at least the all-importance he attaches to the idea of education. All men are made alike by nature, yet they are all different. What causes these differences? Education. On the part of the educated, the basis for education is attention; attention itself depends on interest and on passion, which are always bound with the quest of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. On the strength of these principles, it should be possible for education to mold men after a common pattern, abolishing the individual inequalities and training everyone to delight in actions beneficial to the common good of society. Virtuous actions are such as contribute to the welfare of the country; education will have achieved its end if it places children in surroundings that will determine in them the kind of passions from which virtuous actions inevitably flow... [The main thesis of his speculative philosophy is that] "*physical sensibility* and *memory* are the productive causes of all our *ideas*, and that all our *false judgments* are effects of either our *passions* or of our *ignorance*." At the psychological level, the doctrine is a rehash of Condillac: "all judgment is but sensation," "judging is feeling."

"In the field of philosophy, all the Encyclopedists inclined toward an associationist conception of the human mind, a materialist notion of the human soul, and, with notable hesitations, toward a materialistic interpretation of nature and societies." But of course most of them were deists, and some were far less hostile toward Christianity than others.

Vico impresses me. The Stanford Encyclopedia has a good article on him. He was a deeper thinker than most of the other Enlightenment figures.

Montesquieu. Environmental determinist: different laws are appropriate to different peoples, because they have different climates, different customs, etc. And differences between nations are explained by differences between their environments. Governments are either republican (democratic or aristocratic), monarchical, or despotic. A despotism = no other law but that of the tyrant, while a monarchy = a ruler following fixed and established laws. Montesquieu analyzes each of the governmental forms in great detail. He is "among the greatest philosophers of liberalism"; he's the one who expounded the doctrine of the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers. From the Stanford Encyclopedia:

Certain arrangements make it easier for the three powers to check one another. Montesquieu argues that the legislative power alone should have the power to tax, since it can then deprive the executive of funding if the

latter attempts to impose its will arbitrarily. Likewise, the executive power should have the right to veto acts of the legislature, and the legislature should be composed of two houses, each of which can prevent acts of the other from becoming law. The judiciary should be independent of both the legislature and the executive, and should restrict itself to applying the laws to particular cases in a fixed and consistent manner, so that “the judicial power, so terrible to mankind, ...becomes, as it were, invisible,” and people “fear the office, but not the magistrate.”

James Madison had read his Montesquieu.

Condorcet, the prophet of progress. In this respect, the logical conclusion of one of the trends of the Enlightenment.

Kant: metaphysics tries to go beyond experience—it tries to apply the “categories” [of the understanding] beyond experience, to the world-in-itself—which is illegitimate. It results in paradoxes and endless arguments that go nowhere because they can’t be tested. Newtonian physics works: it can be tested. Metaphysics doesn’t. Cf. the position of the twentieth-century logical positivists.

Kant was confronted with this spectacle: on the one hand, Hume utterly undermining the possibility of forming from experience a valid principle of being; and on the other, Leibniz blandly assuring that all judgments can be reduced to a judgment of identity, that there exists a sufficient reason for everything (unknown to us, of course; but how reassuring merely to know that such a reason exists and that everything has to be just as it is, and, *as it is*, is perfectly *rational!*) Hume and Leibniz are violent extremes. Kant will seek to find a way between them.

He overcomes “the embarrassment of empiricism—its lack of a credible theory of abstraction [i.e., of abstracting from sensations essential and accidental forms] and consequently its failure to explain universality and necessity—...and subsumes Hume’s theory of association into a ‘transcendental’ explanation: the strand of necessity is not mere habit but is rooted in the very nature of the sensibility (and the understanding) as such.” Yup. Or, to speak in modern language, it’s rooted in the biological structures of human cognition.

Descartes was wrong to substantialize the *cogito*, for “the notion of substance is not supposed to be itself the subject of an intuition but only to serve as a unifying function.” One doesn’t directly intuit a substance; one merely applies the concept to the sensory data one intuits. On the other hand, it may after all be the case that a soul, a spiritual substance, exists outside the realm of appearances. “Neither the materialist nor the spiritualist philosophies are right in asserting, respectively, that there is no soul or

that there is a substantial soul, for neither has a legitimate basis for making such assertions. The soul remains an idea of which it is impossible to know whether it exists or not; in any event, reason is led to it necessarily, and there is nothing that suggests that it is impossible for it to exist." That's true--except I don't see how reason is led to it *necessarily*. Same with the idea of God.

A good summary:

The sixteenth century had witnessed the end of a philosophical age—not just that of scholasticism—rather, it was really the end of the age of Greek philosophy. All the technical material used by the Christian philosophers and theologians, from Augustine to Marsilio Ficino, had been dug out of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. The earlier sixteenth-century philosophers had turned to Epicureanism, to Stoicism, and to Greek skepticism; that is, they were still living on the philosophical heritage bequeathed by antiquity...

The birth of modern science was the decisive factor in the rise of modern philosophy. The scientific sterility of Aristotle's logical method contrasted unfavorably with the extraordinary fecundity of the new methods developed by Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler. In consequence, philosophy underwent a twofold change. First, it detached itself from theology because, under its scholastic form, it had become entangled with the now-abandoned Aristotelian physics; secondly, it asked from the newly founded or reformed sciences of nature new methods of philosophical investigation similar to their own.

"Owing to John Locke, Baconian empiricism was to become the driving force of the eighteenth century as visibly as the mathematicism of Descartes had been the dominant influence in the philosophy of the seventeenth."

Etc. I won't go through the rest, since the late eighteenth century is too familiar to me.