Hobbes to Hume

A History of Western Philosophy
SECOND EDITION
For the men of the Middle Ages the world was created by a supremely good power for the discipline of man, with a view to his salvation. Since medieval men believed that God had created everything for this purpose, they held that the way to explain anything was to show how it promotes this end. The result was that medieval science was teleological in form. And since, of course, the underlying purpose was that of the one supreme and totally good God, the medieval sciences all pointed beyond themselves to religion. The universe was a vast sacerdotal system: It had no meaning or value in itself; its importance lay in the role it played—partly symbol, partly stage-set—in the drama of man’s salvation. Everything meant something beyond itself in this religious drama.
Nothing was simply what it was. A tree was not merely a tree, a bird was not merely a bird; a footprint in the sand was not merely a footprint—they were all signs, just as the particular footprint Robinson Crusoe saw was a sign to him that he was not alone on the island. And what was true of the rest of the created universe was true of man. He was not merely man; he was a child of God. And his supreme task was to get back into that right relation with God that his first parent had lost.

Beginning in the Renaissance, beliefs gradually changed. The one supremely important vertical relationship of man to God, which absorbed all the attention of men of the Middle Ages, was eventually replaced by a network of horizontal relations connecting every individual to his social and physical milieu. For modern men, the good life no longer consists in achieving a right relation with God, but in effecting an efficient relation with one's fellow men.

In this respect the modern view is similar to the classical, but there are also important differences. For the classical mind, the universe, if not sacerdotal, was at least teleological. If the classical mind did not conceive of everything as worshipping God, it at least conceived of all things as subserving some purpose and aiming at some good. Hence, for the classical mind, as for the medieval, purpose was the primary mode of explanation. In contrast—and as a result of the success of the new physics, which was rigorously nonteleological in orientation—the modern mind became hostile to the use of purpose as an explanatory principle.

The modern mind also came, eventually, to differ from both the medieval mind and the classical mind in its attitude toward values. It never occurred to the medieval mind that values might not be objectively real. Although it certainly occurred to the Greek Sophists that values are merely the ways individuals feel about things, Plato's and Aristotle's reaffirmation of objectivity was for the most part accepted. The fact that men of the classical period and the Middle Ages agreed that values are objectively real is connected, of course, with the teleological conception of the universe that they shared. If the purpose anything subserves gives it value, and if purposes are objective, values will be objective. Anything will be good (really good, apart from some individual's feeling about it) insofar as it consciously or unconsciously realizes its purpose; anything will be bad insofar as it fails to accomplish its purpose. The same consideration also yields a hierarchy of goods, for values can be compared in terms of the relative height and significance of the purposes they subserve.

It follows that, in abandoning the teleological conception of the universe, the modern mind abandoned this easy way of establishing the objectivity of value. Moreover, modern men did not merely abandon the teleological conception of the universe; gradually they substituted for it a conception of the universe that seemed incompatible with the objectivity of values. This is, of course, the conception of the universe as a vast set of facts—facts that are indifferent to men's values, facts that no one planned with any end in view but that just happen to stand in the sorts of spatiotemporal relations that can be ascertained by the techniques of modern science.

The role that scientific instruments came to play in the accession of factual knowledge had an important bearing on this development. Where would astronomy be without the telescope? Biology without the microscope? But these instruments, which have led to the discovery of innumerable astronomical and biological facts, throw no light at all on values. When a scientist dissects a corpse in a laboratory, he finds no evidence of the courage or magnanimity the living man displayed. Nor do microscopes or telescopes reveal God or freedom or immortality. As long as men believe that these instruments give them the whole truth about the universe, it is difficult for them also to believe that God, freedom, and immortality, courage, justice, and piety are objective realities. It is difficult, that is, for them not to assume that what the instruments reveal—the facts in their spatiotemporal relations—is reality, and that what the instruments do not reveal—the souls, the forms, and the values that classical and medieval minds conceived to be constituent elements in the universe—is merely subjective feeling.

Most of the early modern philosophers sought to save themselves from this drastic conclusion by drawing a sharp distinction between minds (souls, spirits) and all the rest of nature. These philosophers considered everything in nature except minds to have just the characteristics and the properties that the new physics reported: Everything was material, was unthinking, was in motion, was completely determined in its behavior. Minds, on the other hand, knew eternal truths, including the truths of physics; minds were free to choose between goods and evils and so were responsible for their bad choices; minds were capable of contemplating and so getting themselves into a right relation with God, who was also supposed to exist outside the material universe. He was supposed to have created the universe and then left it strictly alone to behave in accordance with the laws of motion that the physicists were discovering.

This dualistic metaphysics had an initial plausibility: It divided the universe into two realms, matter and mind, allotting one to the science of physics and the other to the sciences of theology and ethics; and it argued that if each science remained within its own domain, there could be no quarrel between them. Unfortunately, from the outset this dualistic solution was in serious trouble; eventually, it was in effect wholly exploded by Hume's formidable critique. The new beginning that became necessary was launched by Kant. Kant himself and post-Kantian developments are treated in the last volume of this series. This volume, which is devoted to philosophical theory from Hobbes to Hume, will review the series of increasingly involved attempts to save the basically dualistic formula.

Before these attempts are examined, some of the major changes in the culture that affected the overall course of philosophical development must be reviewed. For convenience, the discussion of this complex of changes will be organized
under three familiar rubrics—"Renaissance," "Reformation," and "Rise of
Science"—which will be taken up in turn in this and the following two chapters.
But it is important not to be misled by names, or by chapter divisions. The
Renaissance, for instance, was not a homogeneous "something" that can be
Sharply and unambiguously distinguished from another homogeneous something,
the Reformation. Nor—though people do, on occasion, call these the "causes"
of modern culture—should we allow ourselves to think that what was occurring
was even remotely analogous to what occurs on a billiard table when one ball
is set in motion by successive impacts from other balls. If an analogy is wanted,
it is better to think of a vast network of interweaving strands crisscrossing in
all sorts of directions in something like a web. This complex pattern of inter-
weaving strands is not the cause of something else, modern culture; it is that
culture as it emerges from a different pattern, the Middle Ages.

This chapter, then, will examine some of the strands that compose the section
of the web called (for convenience) the Renaissance. We shall begin with a strand
that may be labeled "Exploration and Discovery."

Exploration and Discovery

One of the marks of the beginning of modern times was a new spirit of adventure
and curiosity, reflected in, among other things, the many voyages of exploration
during the fifteenth century. Of course, there was nothing absolutely new about
an interest in travel. The Crusaders, for instance, had certainly been travelers;
a great many of them had been adventurers motivated by all sorts of this-worldly
ambitions. And two hundred years before the high tide of exploration, Dante's
Ulysses could experience a sentiment that people think of as peculiarly modern:

"Shipmates," I said, "who through a hundred thousand
perils have reached the West, do not deny
to the brief remaining watch our senses stand
experience of the world beyond the sun.
Greeks! You were not born to live like brutes,
but to press on toward manhood and recognition!"¹

It is suggestive, however, that Dante resorted to the use of a figure drawn from
classical mythology as a symbol of this spirit of adventure. Had he written at
the end of the fifteenth century instead of at the beginning of the fourteenth,
he would have found it difficult to choose among the many contemporaries who
eminently exemplified this spirit. For, though there were medieval explorer-
adventurers, the fifteenth century was characterized by a rapid acceleration of
discovery. In 1415, the Portuguese captured Ceuta, thus gaining a foothold in
Africa. Before the middle of the century, adventuring farther south across the
Atlantic, they reached the mouth of the Senegal. By 1484 they reached the
mouth of the Congo, and the next year Diaz rounded the Cape
Hope.

Not only was there a marked increase in exploration in the fifteenth
but the motives for exploration seem to have gradually changed. Prince
of the energizing force behind the Portuguese activity, had been mov
characteristically medieval ambition: By landing on the African coast to
attack from the rear the Mohammedan infidel, who was securely l
the Mediterranean coast of Africa. This grandiose scheme naturally
ought, but it was soon found that the black men who lived in Africa
be sold in Europe at a handsome profit. For a long while Christi
continued to express itself in an interest in the salvation of souls and th
of the Kingdom of God by the conversion of the Negro, but as time economic motives came to dominate.¹ This was especially true after men
that beyond the southern tip of Africa lay the fabulous Indies.

COLUMBUS

Meanwhile, Columbus had conceived of the possibility of an even mo
route to the Indies. Since it had long been accepted that the earth i
he argued that by sailing due west one ought to be able to reach the e
of Asia. Columbus' bold scheme was not welcomed in the citadels of nava
Venice and Genoa refused to back him; since they were the termini of eastern (overland) route, the possibility of a new trade route that would th
them was a threat to their preeminence. Portugal was uninterested, fo
concentrating on completing the route around Africa. The advantage of a
winner therefore fell to one of the newer states that had yet to stake
for itself in the world. That it happened to be Spain was an accident i
important consequences in the shift in the balance of power during the centuries.

¹ This mixture of motives is plainly visible in Columbus' letter announcing his first ve
 natives, he wrote, were "willing to exchange valuable things for trifles. . . . But I forb
them a very trifling thing . . . because it was plainly unjust; and I gave them many
and pleasing things, which I had brought with me, for no return whatsoever, in or
their affection, and that they might become Christians and inclined to love our
Queen . . . for what I believe our most serene King especially desires is their con
the holy faith of Christ; for which, indeed, so far as I could understand, they are
and prone . . . Therefore let King and Queen and Princes, and their most fortunate
and all other Christian provinces, return thanks to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
so many souls of so many people herefore lost are to be saved; and let us be glad
for the exultation of our faith, but also for the increase in temporal prosperity, in
only Spain but all Christendom is about to share"—text and translation printed in
Columbus' Letter to Raphael Sanchez (Boston Public Library, 1891).