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The Birth of the Modern Mind: The Intellectual History of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Scope:

When the seventeenth century dawned in Europe, the world of learning and formal understanding was dominated by a belief in the presumptive authority of those past authors who had stood the test of time and in the system of thought—Aristotelian scholasticism—that had emerged from the fusion of those authorities and Christian doctrine. A series of fundamental assaults upon the inherited intellectual system dominated the intellectual life of the seventeenth century, just as the combined effects of growth in education and printing dramatically expanded the size and opportunities of the reading public. Those assaults constituted nothing less than a conceptual revolution among students of natural philosophy (the study of natural things by the natural mind), a revolution that altered the European relationship to thought, nature, and human possibility. In the eighteenth century, that conceptual revolution—associated most clearly with what we now term the “scientific revolution,” but which was a transformation of all aspects of human inquiry and understanding—was popularized, translated into new media, and extended to areas of nature and human activity beyond those imagined by most seventeenth-century thinkers. By the end of the eighteenth century, the prestige of ancient thought and of the inherited system was a thing of the past. Educated Europeans believed that they had a new understanding—of thought and the human mind, of method, of nature, and of the uses of knowledge—with which they could come to know the world correctly for the first time in human history and with which they could rewrite the possibilities of human life. The goal of these lectures is to understand that conceptual and cultural revolution as a historical phenomenon, seeing the birth of modern thought in the dilemmas, debates, and extraordinary works of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mind.

The broad themes of the seventeenth century’s intellectual revolution involved a rejection of the presumptive authority of the past in general and a diverse set of furious assaults upon the inherited Aristotelian synthesis in particular. In the place of that authority and system, thinkers proposed systems and outlooks that sometimes reinforced each other (in ways that we often find odd today but that were understandable to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers) and that often competed with each other as possible replacements of the increasingly discredited authorities. These new systems and outlooks included empiricism, experimentalism, rationalism, quantification of nature, mechanism, skepticism about philosophy and certainty, and the radical separation of theology and natural inquiry. Readers often evaluated theories in purely abstract terms, but the public also came to see theories as tested or embodied in concrete works of inquiry. The most dramatic such example was Newton’s *Principia*

Mathematica, which so much of the culture came to believe had made the world comprehensible and coherent, and whose presumed system of inquiry became identified with the theory of knowledge advanced by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The eighteenth century sought to take the models of Newton and Locke and apply them to the fullest possible range of human inquiry and endeavor.

The conceptual revolution of the seventeenth century was above all a series of philosophical clashes over abstract and fundamental issues, although its outcome was far from abstract. In the eighteenth century, the heirs of that conceptual revolution—the “new philosophers”—both popularized what they took to be the substance and implications of what had occurred in the seventeenth century and extended them to new areas of inquiry. They also dealt in various ways with the dramatic implications of the new philosophy for essential religious issues: miracle, revelation, supernaturalism, the authority of the priesthood, human nature, sin, and virtue. They sought to understand both society and religion in increasingly natural terms, to establish the rights of freedom of inquiry and belief, and to discredit, reform, or replace those authorities that could not justify themselves by the new criteria and proper uses of knowledge. In these endeavors, eighteenth-century thinkers effected a genuine cultural transformation more revolutionary than anything that occurred in the social or political life of eighteenth-century Europe. It would be false to attribute unintended consequences to the systems of thought from which these arose, but it is crucial to human understanding to know what have been, in fact, the consequences of ideas. This course will put us at the heart of the most far-reaching and consequential intellectual changes in the history of European civilization.

Objectives

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. Describe the major changes that occurred in the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in terms of what the thinkers of this era most rejected in the intellectual inheritance with which this age began.
2. Summarize the main schools of seventeenth-century thought that influenced the cultural revolution of the eighteenth century.
3. Give an account of the revolution in epistemology (theories of knowledge) and ontology (theories of what exists as real) that most changed the ways in which European thought about their world.
4. Explain the so-called “scientific revolution” in terms of the debates and dilemmas of early modern thought.
5. Describe the problems posed by changes in thinking about nature and knowledge for the religious life of Europe.

6. Summarize which sides of seventeenth-century thinkers are appropriated and which sides are ignored by eighteenth-century thinkers.
7. Describe the conflicts that emerged in the eighteenth century between the “new philosophers” and the Church.
8. Explain how “the pursuit of happiness” became a compelling moral and political criterion for a religious culture.
9. Summarize the most striking unintended consequences of systems of thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
10. Identify the most essential unresolved debates of the early modern period.

Lecture Thirteen

The Moderns: The Generation of 1680-1715

Scope: The generation of readers and authors between 1680 and 1715 was one of the most revolutionary in European history because it was marked by a fundamental change of attitudes toward knowledge and nature. It was not obvious at the time that this change was occurring—scholasticism remained entrenched in the universities, and fideism and mysticism were vital forces in the culture—but the new philosophers were coming to dominate the learned world, winning the debates, interest, and affection of the reading public.

If we examine the attitude of this generation toward the terms of the *disputatio* by means of which we first came to know the scholastics, we see clearly the transformation of European thought in the seventeenth century. The generation of 1680 to 1715 increasingly rejected the presumptive authority of the past; it increasingly believed induction from data, not deduction from inherited premises, to be the path toward truth; and it made the systematic inquiry into experience, now seen as “the book of nature,” the heart of natural philosophy.

Further, the rejection of the presumptive authority of the past in natural philosophy led quite naturally to a rejection of the presumptive authority of the past in general. Europe possessed a growing sense that it had acquired something unique from seventeenth-century thinkers—proper method—that would alter both knowledge and the human relationship to nature. The new philosophers increasingly created and inhabited new centers of intellectual and cultural change: academies, learned journals, coffee houses, and non-university learned societies. They also popularized and began to extend the arguments of the celebrated figures of the seventeenth century. Their heroes were Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, Locke, and Newton, from whom they took what was most general, far-reaching, and innovative. They were drawn to empiricism, quantification, and the naturalization of their world view. They increasingly assailed what they took to be superstition, and they brought an end to the persecution of alleged witches. The new philosophers were determined to remove theology from areas not properly within its sphere, and they wished to devise both an independent domain of natural inquiry and a theology consistent with the new knowledge. This raised extraordinary dilemmas concerning miracles, revelation, and ethics, dilemmas that dominated much of eighteenth-century intellectual life. By the end of the seventeenth century, we stand at the birth of modern consciousness.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the extraordinary change taking place in the thought and attitudes of the generation of 1680 to 1715.
2. Explain the fate of the criteria of the *disputatio* in the course of the seventeenth century.
3. Describe the milieux outside the universities that sustained the new philosophy.
4. Summarize the heroes of the new philosophers and what they took from them.
5. Describe the variety of influences of the new philosophy upon religious questions and attitudes.

Outline

- I. The generation of 1685-1715 embodied a fundamental change of attitude toward the means of knowing truth.
 - A. This generation overturned the authority of the *disputatio*.
 1. It rejected the presumptive authority of the past and increasingly recognized the rights of natural reason even in the presence of theological authority.
 2. Rather than relying on syllogistic deduction from premises drawn from authority, it relied on induction—the logic of inference from experience.
 3. European thinkers became accustomed to looking to “the book of nature”—i.e., to experiment, experience, and nature.
 - B. Thinkers drew an analogy from the seventeenth-century revolution in natural philosophy to the means of new knowledge and the reexamination of all claims of truth.
 1. There was a growing sense that Europe had acquired something that would alter both knowledge and the human relationship to nature: method.
 2. Rightly or wrongly, the awesome accomplishments of seventeenth-century natural philosophy were associated with induction from nature, ordered by reason into laws as general and universal as possible, confirmed by experiment and experience, and, wherever possible, put to the use of mankind.
- II. The self-image of the “new philosophers” is seen in their emerging heroes. What aspects of seventeenth-century thought provided the foundation for the early eighteenth-century generation of thinkers?
 - A. From Bacon they took learning from nature and the rejection of the received authority of the past.
 1. They learned to reject the Idols of the Theater: automatic deference to received authorities.

2. From Bacon they took induction and the essentiality of method (the metaphor of the path) without reference to theology.
 3. They also took the view of knowledge as human power to enhance human well-being and reduce suffering.
- B.** From Descartes they took the rights of reason.
1. They emphasized the right of philosophy to begin in doubt: believe nothing, absent rational conviction.
 2. They also derived from Descartes the quest for order and clarity: the desire to understand the world.
 3. They also appropriated Descartes' belief in the human ability to understand the mechanisms by which the natural order is governed.
- C.** From Galileo they took the freedom of natural philosophy.
1. They looked to nature rather than to human books.
 2. Their view of nature was mathematized.
- D.** From Locke they took his claim that all knowledge arises from and is bounded in experience.
1. They also appropriated his admission of ignorance on matters beyond experience.
 2. They adhered to his view that all knowledge is constructed from confirmable units of simple experience, and that all claims of truth may be examined in such a light.
- E.** From Newton they took the belief that nature was lawful in design and that the human mind could understand these laws.
1. With an understanding of three laws of motion and the law of gravity, both celestial and terrestrial physics fall into place.
 2. Nature is lawful and designed: we see through nature to Nature's God.
- F.** It was still very much a mixed intellectual world.
1. Aristotelian scholastics still dominated the universities.
 2. Skepticism and fideism were vital, but fideism was formally condemned in Catholic Europe and about to be swept away by the new confidence in natural philosophy.
- G.** The "new philosophers" set the terms of debate and increasingly won the affections of the growing reading public. The public perceived it as having both theoretical strength (Locke) and concrete accomplishments (Newton and the new science).
- H.** This generation identified a new locus of change and influence.
1. Philosophical thought moved beyond the universities and clerical orders, and into the academies, journals, and coffee-houses.
 2. A growing secular reading public emerged, with a will to know. People greeted the new philosophers of the eighteenth century with the same exhilaration with which they read the seventeenth-century new philosophers.

3. Beyond abstruse philosophy, popularizers of the intellectual revolution were increasingly read.

III. The sea-change in attitudes.

- A.** The new philosophy had several distinctive marks, including:
1. Rejection of the presumptive authority of the past
 2. Empiricism—all issues are open to inquiry based upon experience.
 3. Quantification
 4. Naturalization of one's world view, and refusal to attribute physical phenomena to extra-natural causes.
- B.** The new philosophy constituted a cultural and religious revolution.
1. It launched an assault on witchcraft belief, superstition, and enthusiasm.
 2. It located God's providence in natural laws.
 3. It promoted a new religious aesthetic marked by the rejection of particular (as opposed to general) providence.
 4. The new philosophy posed problems for belief in miracles as emblematic of particular providence.
- C.** In both England and France at the end of the seventeenth century and the dawn of the eighteenth century, we witness an intense scholarly debate between "the ancients versus the moderns."
1. The past may well be superior in its art.
 2. But knowledge and science are cumulative.
 3. Knowledge creates progress: the more we know about the real causes of things, the more we may change the world according to the heart's desire for human happiness.

IV. The new philosophers sought to remove theology from areas not properly its sphere, and to devise a theology consistent with and evolving with advances in natural knowledge.

V. By the end of the seventeenth century, we stand at the birth of modern consciousness: scientific, secular, inquiring, seeking a principle of authority apart from mere tradition and repetition of the past, but tempted by skepticism and leaps of faith, critical, and confused by the range of choices it has created for itself. For better or for worse, we are the heirs of the seventeenth-century mind, living in its light and in its shadows.

Essential Reading:

Alan Charles Kors and Paul Korshin, eds., *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany.*

Supplementary Reading:

Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680-1715.*

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the implications of the growing critique of "superstition" and witchcraft persecutions?
2. In what ways has the generation of 1680-1715 distorted the intentions of the authors whose works it appropriated?

Lecture Fourteen

Introduction to Deism

Scope: Deism is a widespread religious phenomenon among the educated classes of Europe in the eighteenth century. It embodies belief in a God whose existence and goodness are proven by nature, and disbelief in the Judeo-Christian (or any other) tradition and revelation. It also embodies a complete naturalization and generalization of God's providence. God's sole relationship to the creation is through the natural order that reflects His will, which rules out all acts of particular providence—above all, miracles and revelation.

Historians traditionally have distinguished between positive deism (the proof of God and his qualities) and negative deism (the critique of claims of religious revelation and special truth). As critics of Christian culture, deists engage in historical criticism of the veracity and canonicity of Scripture; in moral criticism of the qualities attributed to God by Scripture; and in social criticism of the role of mystery and priesthood in governance. Deists assert rights of freedom of thought, and they refuse to acknowledge any religious truth not established by natural evidence and reason.

One of the best examples of negative deism is the English deist Thomas Woolston on miracles. In an age that demands proof of the historicity of the miracles, Woolston argues for allegorical interpretation of Christ's miracles, given their literal impossibility and contradictions. If they are not literally true, however, the proof of the divine origin of Christianity by reference to the miracles is vitiated.

The deists are marked, above all, by their common contempt for the Christian clergy, whom they see as suppressing reason and free inquiry, separating mankind from its natural birthright, and distorting the natural moral criteria. The struggle between deistic and Christian intellectuals will be one of the defining characteristics of the eighteenth century.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the distinguishing general characteristics of deism.
2. Explain the religious implications of the naturalization and generalization of providence.
3. Summarize the deistic arguments against seeing the Christian revelation as divine.
4. Describe the anti-clericalism of the deists.

Outline

- I. Deism was the religion and theology of a surprising number of new philosophers in the eighteenth century. It had vast appeal.
 - A. There are several simple definitions of deism:
 1. Belief in God, but disbelief in the Judeo-Christian revelation and tradition.
 2. The complete naturalization of Providence.
 3. The complete generalization of Providence (rejection of particular Providence).
 - B. From this view, there follows the rejection of revelation, miracles, and any particular relationship to God.
 - C. The sufficiency of nature: God has created us in a natural order through which we shall know God and moral law.
- II. The roots and dual nature of deism are found in seventeenth-century naturalism.
 - A. The deists exalted naturalism and offered a critique of authority and tradition.
 - B. They were indebted to the fideism of Bayle and to the new critical scholarship.
 - C. They were also indebted to Socinianism (anti-trinitarian thought), although the Socinians regarded themselves as Christians.
 - D. Traditionally, historians and students of religion have distinguished between two sides of eighteenth-century deism.
 1. Positive deism (deistic theology) affirmed the existence and goodness of God, and saw humanity as linked to God through nature.
 2. Negative deism (criticism of orthodox and revealed religion) rejected all claims of revealed religion and critiqued the Judeo-Christian tradition.
- III. Positive Deism
 - A. Positive deism posits the existence of a universal God acting through universal providence (laws of nature) and known by universal faculties (sense experience and reason) in a universal medium (nature).
 - B. How is God known to us? From His work, nature, which is open to our examination by means of the faculties with which He endowed us.
 1. Thus God is the Creator and Providential lawgiver through the structure and mechanisms of nature.
 2. Those laws are our link to His will (e.g., the pursuit of happiness).
 - C. God is known to us empirically through design and moral intention.

- D. God is also known to us rationally. Tindal argued that God is self-sufficient. What could He, a perfect being, possibly need from the creation? God's goal is the happiness of His creatures.

IV. Negative Deism

- A. Negative deism offers a critique of revelation.
 1. Its historical criticism is applied to the canon, to the veracity of Scripture, to its chronology, and to its sources and science.
 2. They also criticize it on moral grounds, decrying the immoral qualities of the Judeo-Christian God, the blasphemy of particularity, and the moral nightmare of Christian history.
 3. They observe that mystery in religion promotes the power and privilege of priests, the guardians of the mysteries.
- B. Revealed and supernatural religion has separated mankind from its divine natural birthright: senses, reason, pleasure.

V. Common Deistic Themes

- A. True religion must agree with natural reason and evidence; thus true scriptural knowledge is coterminous with knowledge.
- B. There is no possible need for revelation, because God has created nature and minds capable of understanding nature and the author of nature.
- C. Natural criteria, known to be from God, trump supernatural claims.
- D. The only individuals who benefit from allegedly mysterious supernatural claims are the self-appointed keepers of the secrets.
- E. Freedom of thought is always essential, because even the decision to obey authorities is a decision one makes freely. At some level, free thought is a necessity.
 1. This freedom of thought alone gives value to one's beliefs and choices.
 2. Freedom of thought implies a freedom from arbitrary authority, a human standard of assent, and a human criterion for belief in any creed.
 3. Thought alone leads to God. Either we understand God rationally by human, natural criteria, or else we understand nothing of Him and give assent to things we do not comprehend.
 4. Claims of particular revelation are always pretense.

VI. Deist Critique of Prophecy and Miracles

- A. The English deists argue that in fact the prophecies did not come true.
 1. Such claims show a great lack of historical knowledge.
 2. They are accomplished only by the most metaphorical and allegorical interpretations of biblical passages.
 3. Such a method could prove anything.

4. Examples include Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul; the idea of a chosen people; contradictions in early Church history; and the precariousness of, and the human decisions involved in, the creation of the accepted canon.

B. For deists, the authors of Scripture are very flawed human beings.

1. The authors are accused of anthropomorphism (e.g., portraying God in states of rest, anger, or jealousy).
2. They exhibit pre-scientific superstitions (e.g., talking snakes; Moses and the Pharaoh's magicians).
3. The Jews and Christians projected vile human traits onto the Deity (e.g., Joshua and the slaughter of the innocents).
4. They invest God with vulgar ignorance (e.g., Christ saying that a seed must die before it could bear fruit).

C. The best example of negative deism is Thomas Woolston's discourse on miracles.

1. He argues for "allegorical" interpretations, all based on the impossibility of the supposed miracle and on the greed and fraud of the clergy.
2. Woolston was really saying that the literal miracles did not occur. If that is so, then what of the proof of revelation by scientific evidence of miracle?

VII. Conclusion: The Heart of the Deist Critique of Revealed Religion and Its Traditions

- A. The deists embody a striking hatred of the Christian clergy and their role, and a contempt for the Judeo-Christian portrayal of God in Scripture.
- B. God, for the deists, has revealed Himself to us in nature.
- C. Mankind, from God's loving creation, is self-sufficient.
- D. We have been deprived of this knowledge by those who deny reason, the natural faculties and inclinations, and who deny the natural right and moral criterion, from God, of human happiness in this natural world—in short, by the Christians.

Essential Reading:

Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*.

Supplementary Reading:

Peter Gay, ed., *Deism: An Anthology*.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In what ways (or not) is deism an application of seventeenth-century natural philosophy to questions of religion?
2. To what extent is deism a moral rather than historical critique of Christianity?

Lecture Fifteen

The Conflict Between Deism and Christianity

Scope: In one sense, the conflict between deism and Christianity, which would influence so much of eighteenth-century intellectual life, reflected the recurrent tension, in all cultures informed both by "Athens" and "Jerusalem," between the God posited by philosophy and the God worshipped by the pious. In its most particular sense, however, deism reflected, in its rejection of the God of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments, the first fundamental challenge to Judeo-Christian theology to emerge strongly within Christian culture itself. Deists and Christians clashed over the most essential theological issues: the source of our knowledge of God, the manifestation of God's love and providence, the relationship of God to His creation, the grounds of religious belief, the problem of evil, sin, morality, the goal of life, and the secular implications of religious truth. Although Christian theologians themselves disagreed intensely and creatively on a host of issues, they were united what they shared in opposition to the deists: a belief in a supernatural reality of revelation, particular providence, divine intervention in human history, sin and redemption.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Summarize the main points of conflict between deistic and Christian thinkers.
2. Explain the deistic-Christian debate over particular providence.
3. Describe the deists' confidence in the sufficiency of nature.
4. Explain the importance of the problem of evil to the deistic-Christian debate.

Outline

- I. There is recurrent conflict and tension, independent of deism, between the God of the philosophers and the God of the pious.
- II. Christians and deists engaged in fundamental debates on a variety of important topics:
 - A. Knowledge of God
 1. The Christian stresses the insufficiency of natural knowledge alone and the need for resort to God as revealed through the supernatural.
 2. The deist looks to God as made manifest by nature to the senses and understanding.

B. God's love

1. The Christian holds that God so loved the world that He became incarnate as Jesus, who died to offer redemption.
2. The deist holds that God so loved the world that He created it with the means of redemption always present in nature, always at hand.

C. Creation

1. The Christian views God as the creator of the world in seven days, some 6,000 years ago, and as the creator of Adam and Eve.
2. The deist views God as the creator of the material universe, the Newtonian world order, and the laws of nature. When, how, and in what modes He did so was a matter for science to investigate.

D. The Relation of God to His Creation

1. The Christian emphasizes the particular relations of God with creation, and above all with mankind, and he stresses the efficacy of prayer.
2. The deist emphasizes the universalistic relations of God with creation, and he denies the efficacy of prayer.

E. Revelation

1. The Christian believes that God granted a particular revelation to the Jews; He granted a historically particular but universally available revelation to Christians through Scripture and the operations of the Holy Spirit.
2. According to the deist, God reveals Himself universally through nature and science.

F. Belief

1. The Christian identifies a category of religious belief that is acquired through faith, but which is not necessarily contrary to reason and evidence.
2. The deist accepts religious belief that is acquired only through evidence and reason.

G. Intervention of God

1. The Christian believes that God intervenes in imperfect nature to achieve His will. He accepts the reality of miracle, prophecy, and gifts of the Spirit, and he views history as providential, reflecting God's loving intervention. Secondary causes constitute the usual course, but God is free to leave them operative or suspend or alter them.
2. The deist denies that God intervenes, since this would contradict the perfection of creation. God's will is immutable. The history of the world is providential only in an ultimate sense. God's will is manifest in the laws of nature.

H. The Goal of Life

1. For the Christian, the goal of life is the glory of God and the salvation of the soul; there is a world to come, with one's ultimate destination for eternity in hell or heaven.
2. The deist views the goal of life (from natural revelation) as happiness on earth. There might or might not be an afterlife in which the virtuous are particularly rewarded, but this does not alter the goal of life, and there is no hell, the existence of which would contradict the goodness of God.

I. The Problem of Evil

1. The Christian regards physical evil as incomprehensible—who is man to question God?
2. The deist is committed to philosophical optimism and views physical evil as an illusion. All things contribute to the general good.

J. Sin and Wickedness

1. The Christian argues that man's fall from grace accounts for human wickedness.
2. The deist denies the existence of original sin, and he sees wickedness as *contra natura*. Man is ignorant, betrayed, deceived, and misled, above all by particularistic religions.

K. Morality

1. The Christian believes that man has fallen beyond the means of self-redemption. He needs grace in order to fulfill his highest possibilities (charity, love, faith). However, there is a growing anti-Calvinism that takes a more positive view of human nature.
2. The deist views man as self-sufficient, possessing providential natural instincts, and, for most deists, a natural moral sense. Our goal as natural creatures is to fulfill our heart's desire for happiness.

L. Secular Needs for Moral Achievement

1. The Christian emphasizes restraint and religion. After redemption, however, the saved Christian enjoys a Christian freedom.
2. The deist emphasizes enlightened self-interest; natural instincts are allowed to develop in freedom.

Essential Reading:

E. Graham Waring, ed., *Deism and Natural Religion*.

Supplementary Reading:

C.J. Betts, *Early Deism in France*.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the most fundamental point of disagreement between deists and Christians?
2. In retrospect, has much of deistic thinking become a part of what now is called "Christianity"?

Lecture Sixteen

Montesquieu and the Problem of Relativism

Scope: Although the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century did much to increase the culture's sense of the commonality and communicability of knowledge about nature, it also raised the problem of relativism. If, as Locke believed, knowledge and moral ideas were caused and bounded by one's experience, then one's sense of the world would be relative to one's time, place, personal experience, and physical senses. This notion of the relativism of knowledge and values was given dramatic impetus by the increasing European interaction with foreign peoples and cultures. That contact provoked not only great curiosity, but a growing awareness of differences among cultures that appeared to extend to fundamental areas of belief, morality, and the ability to communicate.

Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (*Persian Letters*) were a great success in the 1720s, not only because of their exoticism, but because they obsessed upon and explored the problem of the relativism of human perspectives, a problem made more vivid to him by his own personal experiences in the world of learning (experiences that put him in contact with scholars of both distant and ancient worlds). While Montesquieu uses his fictional Persian travelers to satirize and criticize much of Western and, in particular, French life, he also poses the central two questions of his concern: "What is relative to time and place? What is natural and universal?" He links these two domains—the relative and the natural—by exploring the reality of difference and the reality of natural consequences. Human beings may live and believe in a startling variety of ways, but there is a reality principle of objective natural consequences that set limits to our malleability and to our systems. Awareness of relativism, for Montesquieu and for Voltaire, should lessen national and religious arrogance, but it should not blind us that nature, not human wish, determines our common and objective ground. In matters so essential to human life as the relationship between men and woman (the subplot of the harem) or the organization of society (the parable of the Troglodytes), Montesquieu concludes, variety prevails, but there are objective conditions of justice and survival that we ignore at our peril. Despotism is all too real, but it is objectively against nature and inherently unstable.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Explain how the problem of the relativity of knowledge arises from the premises of Lockean empiricism.

2. Describe the importance of travel and missionary literature to European debates of the eighteenth century.
3. Explain the tension between relativism and naturalism in Montesquieu's thought.
4. Give an account of how Montesquieu uses his account of the cyclical history of the Troglodytes to reveal both the relativism and the objective realities of ethical and political systems.
5. Summarize Montesquieu's view of despotism.

Outline

- I. Eighteenth-century relativism had several general sources.
 - A. Despite its obvious encouragement of seeing knowledge as social and communicable, Lockean epistemology carries within it the seeds of relativism.
 1. If one's knowledge and moral ideas are bounded and determined by one's experience, then one's sense of the world, one's values, and one's beliefs are relative to time, place, and personal experience.
 2. Locke's doctrine of nominal and real essences establishes that we know only the appearances of things.
 3. Locke's doctrine makes one's beliefs relative to the nature of the human senses.
 - B. Europe's encounter with foreign and "exotic" peoples (the effect of which was multiplied by the growth of printing and the reading public) produced curiosity about and astonishment over differences among cultures, and an awareness that Europeans seemed as strange to others as others did to them.
 1. Europeans were struck by the differences between their own and other cultures with regard to the treatment of women and the elderly, and the diversity of religions, moral codes, and beliefs.
 2. They were struck by difficulties of translation and by the very fact of flourishing non-Christian cultures.
 3. Voltaire began his history of the world with an account of China.
 4. Best sellers of the era included *The Turkish Spy*; *1001 Nights*; and accounts of American Indians.
- II. Montesquieu's relativism has additional sources.
 - A. His background makes him sensitive to difference and particular perspectives.
 1. The milieu of the *parlement* of Bordeaux inculcates an awareness of absolutism and of arbitrary power.
 2. His Huguenot (Protestant) wife inculcates an awareness of toleration and of the accident of birth.

- B. His intellectual encounters after he comes to Paris dramatically heighten his sense of the relativity of beliefs.
 1. He meets with the savants at the Academy of Inscriptions.
 2. Montesquieu's educated Chinese friend had converted to Christianity in China. After coming to Europe, he was astonished at the hypocrisy of the supposedly Christian Europeans.

III. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* enjoyed extraordinary literary success.

- A. The *Persian Letters* is an epistolary novel in which "Persian" travelers see France and the West through Persian eyes. This device allows Montesquieu great freedom to comment on his world and to deepen his readers' sense of the relativity of belief to time and place.
- B. The Substance of the *Persian Letters*
 1. The pope, the king, nobles, and bishops are viewed through "Persian" eyes.
 2. Montesquieu makes light of ethnocentrism: a Frenchman asks, "How could anyone be a Persian?"
 3. Montesquieu asks: "What is relative to time and place? What is natural and absolute?" He seeks to distinguish between what is malleable and what is common to all human experience.
 4. The implications for politics: we see varieties of despotism everywhere, but we also see indications of a natural law of liberty.
 5. The implications for religion: there are varieties of dogma, but we also see a natural law of God's justice and truth.
 6. The implications for ethics: we see various moral codes but also the reality of natural consequences.
 7. The implications for psychology: we see a great variety of male-female relations and of human self-images, but we also see evidence of the permanence of human nature.
 8. The implications for philosophy: we see various approaches to knowledge but also the singularity of natural truth.

IV. Montesquieu in the *Persian Letters* and Voltaire in his "philosophical tales" increasingly speak for the consensus emerging in the French Enlightenment.

- A. Science is a unifying truth amid the relativities of perspective.
- B. Our common ground is set by nature's reality principle, not by human wish.
- C. For both Montesquieu and Voltaire, an awareness of relativism should lessen national and religious pride.
- D. For both, that awareness should promote tolerance and move us toward what we have in common as human beings: empirical science, the recognition of natural needs and consequences, and worship of the author of nature.

V. The two most striking tales of the *Persian Letters*—the parable of the Troglodytes and the human reality of the harem—lead to and dramatically illustrate the conclusion that forms of association and government arise in response to specific circumstances, making them relative, but they have real consequences, which are universal.

A. The parable of the Troglodytes teaches that the realities of survival and death set natural limits to human variation.

1. The original Troglodytes, naturally wild, need a tyrant in order to survive.
2. Tyrannized, the Troglodytes rebel anarchically and selfishly. In vicious anarchy, however, they virtually perish.
3. The virtuous Troglodytes succeed and prosper, but they create a luxury which undermines the practice of virtue: they wish to be governed so that they might attend only to wealth.
4. Thus an independent natural reality exists in which behaviors have real consequences, and which points to universal values. Human societies can achieve any number of forms, but they cannot survive unless they solve the problem of linking the individual to the broader society.

B. The harem shows both the extraordinary variation in forms of male-female association—which people take to be given wholly by nature—and the enduring problem of despotism in human life.

1. The tale illustrates the contrast between the "freedom" of French women and the enslavement of women to a master's will in the Persian harem.
2. All cultures assume that their particular forms of association are "natural."
3. When the despot is unable to exercise terror, the harem revolts and the laws of nature reassert themselves against the despot's arbitrary will. Only terror makes despotism seem stable and permanent.
4. The irony of despotism: the Persian Uzbek sees all despotism around him except his own.

Essential Reading:

Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*.

Supplementary Reading:

Voltaire, *Micromegas*.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why don't Montesquieu's relativistic insights lead to a thorough skepticism about all human knowledge?

2. In what ways do European encounters with foreign cultures reinforce tendencies of the seventeenth century's intellectual revolution?

Lecture Seventeen

Voltaire : Bringing England To France

Scope: Few works had greater impact in popularizing the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century and in inaugurating debates that would shape the eighteenth century in France than Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* (*Philosophical Letters*) from England, published in 1734. Voltaire celebrates English religious, political, commercial, and intellectual liberty, and he popularizes the systems of Locke and Newton. He begins with discussions of heterodoxy, orthodoxy, and toleration in English religious life, linking toleration to the commercial values and prosperity of England, and rebuking by implication an officially intolerant, anti-commercial, aristocratic, and despotic France. While idealizing English life (although not English history), Voltaire celebrates a limited government of laws, legal equality, religious pluralism, philosophical and scientific freedom, and a secular society. He also celebrates English empiricism and new philosophy, which, by the example of inoculation against smallpox (accepted in England but illegal in France), he presents as extraordinarily useful to human life.

To those who argue that the new philosophy is dangerous to society and state, Voltaire replies that it has been the theologians who have fomented civil war and mutual hatreds while the philosophers peaceably communicate with each other and work for the improvement of the human condition. In the *Lettres Philosophiques*, we see the eighteenth century's expansion of the meaning of "philosophy" and the scope of translating the conceptual revolution of the seventeenth century for a more popular audience.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Explain the historical significance of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* in the dissemination of ideas in the eighteenth century.
2. Summarize the usefulness of English religious variety to Voltaire's lesson for France.
3. Give an account of what Voltaire most admires (and wants France to learn from) in English political and social life.
4. Distinguish between what is meant by "a government of laws" and by "a government of men."
5. Summarize what Voltaire most admires about English empiricism and natural philosophy.

Outline

- I. The Background of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* from England
 - A. Voltaire's formation had made him a deist, new philosopher, and freethinker prior to his trip to England.
 - B. Voltaire went to England to avoid the Bastille and punishment for having offended a princely aristocrat.
- II. Voltaire's *English Letters* (also called the *Philosophical Letters*) are a celebration of English thought and political life and an assault upon orthodox, absolute, and aristocratic France.
 - A. Many historians have seen them as the first essential work of the French Enlightenment.
 - B. In France, their publication produces exceptionally strong condemnation of Voltaire and his lifetime banishment from Paris.
 - C. Voltaire adopts a narrative voice that moves from native orthodoxy to cosmopolitan heterodoxy, and he uses irony and laughter, allowing the reader to draw his or her own "enlightened conclusions" in response.
- III. Voltaire's first six Letters concern the subject of English churches and sects. They introduce his readers to criticisms of the Catholic Church and to a free-thinking discussion of religion.
 - A. The first four Letters are devoted to the Quakers, whom Voltaire compares favorably not only to the Catholics, but to all established Christian churches.
 1. Voltaire's Quakers defend their differences from other Christian churches by appeal to Scripture: the Bible can be used to defend mutually exclusive positions.
 2. He portrays the Quakers as shocked by the ceremonialism of other religions.
 3. He praises their simplicity, their ethics, their sense of the equality of human beings, and especially their tolerance.
 4. Voltaire also criticizes those aspects of their faith shared by revealed and supernatural religion in general. However, he is far gentler than in his usual tone on particular creeds.
 5. Voltaire offers a purely secular and sociological analysis of why young Quakers are turning to the Anglican Church. In doing so, he treats religion as a phenomenon that can be studied in wholly natural terms.
 - B. To the extent that the Church of England resembles the French Catholic Church, it is satirized and criticized. To the extent that it deviates from the Catholic Church, it is gently, if ironically, praised.
 1. Voltaire criticizes the hierarchical episcopacy.

2. He analyzes the intolerance of churchmen and laments their role in fomenting or aggravating England's wars and civil strife.
 3. He praises the clear legal pre-eminence of the state over the Church, and the relatively better morals of the English churchmen.
- C. Voltaire emphasizes the Puritanism, bitter zeal, and intolerance of the Presbyterians, and he reminds readers of their role in the English Civil War.
- D. Voltaire praises the intellectual merit and temperament of the anti-Trinitarian Socinians (i.e., the Unitarians), who, of all Christians, are the closest to the deists.
- IV. Voltaire uses England as a foil to criticize what he sees as the despotism and unenlightened government of France.
- A. Voltaire idealizes English life. He identifies the following factors as sources of England's success.
1. It has a government of laws, not of arbitrary individual wills.
 2. Government power is limited by civil liberties and legal equality.
 3. Civil strife, fanaticism, and persecution are limited by means of religious tolerance.
 4. Commercial freedom produces a commercial prosperity that allows the individual to serve his own interest in a way that enriches the society at large.
 5. In English society, the arts and sciences are free, respected, and flourishing.
 6. For Voltaire, all of these positive qualities are interrelated, each reinforcing the other.
- B. France—intolerant, anti-commercial, aristocratic and despotic—looks especially unappealing when contrasted with Voltaire's idealized picture of England—tolerant, secular, governed by law and liberty, and engaged in productive commerce.
- V. Voltaire introduces his readers to (and popularizes) English empiricism, and especially the thought of Bacon, Locke, and Newton.
- A. In his letter on inoculation against smallpox, Voltaire expresses the philosophy of the Enlightenment in outline: reason and experience allow us to employ a method which saves lives and reduces suffering.
1. Knowledge moves us from helplessness to natural understanding to increased happiness.
 2. All things should be judged by their effects upon human well-being.
- B. Voltaire urges the French to recognize the superiority of Locke to Descartes.
1. He asserts the superiority of empiricism over rationalism as a means of acquiring knowledge of the world from the world. He

argues on behalf of Locke's sensationalism and against Descartes's notion of innate ideas.

2. Voltaire presents Locke as a man who studies how the mind actually behaves instead of vainly theorizing about the substance or nature of the mind.
3. Voltaire defends Locke's argument that philosophical skepticism is the only honest conclusion, since it would be impious to assume that an omnipotent God could not have created matter capable of thought. This is not materialism, but an appropriate recognition of the limits of human knowledge.
4. Avoiding metaphysical hypotheses and irresolvable arguments, let us study ourselves and the world through our limited natural faculties.
5. Voltaire criticizes theologians who claim that Locke and other philosophers threaten morality and society. He holds that the theologians themselves have bred discord and war.
6. Voltaire lauds Newton's application of Lockean empiricism to the study of nature.

Essential Reading:

Voltaire, *The Philosophical Letters*.

Supplementary Reading:

Ira O. Wade, *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* (read selectively, by interest).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Voltaire calls his letters "philosophical." What does "philosophical" mean in that context?
2. Although Voltaire offers descriptions of England, his agenda is clearly, at some level, moral. What are the values embedded in or implied by his account of English life?

Lecture Eighteen

Bishop Joseph Butler and God's Providence

Scope: The increasing naturalization of God's providence—locating God's wisdom, love, power, and intentions in the regular order of nature—was not simply a deistic phenomenon, but a tidal current of early modern culture on which both deism and Christian theology were carried. Seventeenth-century inquiry had revealed ordered laws of nature with God as lawgiver, and thinkers increasingly saw those laws as the will of God. Following nature meant following the will of God. In moral theology, this meant the revaluation of the mechanism whereby human beings seek pleasure and flee pain. For naturalizing Christian moral theologians, that "pursuit of happiness" was obviously intended by God and, therefore, was obviously linked to virtue. "Following nature" could mean many things conceptually to early modern thinkers, but to many concerned with locating the will of God in nature, it meant following the purposes for which we had been created, as determined by our constitution and highest qualities.

Thus the revered and pious Bishop Joseph Butler, preeminent moral theologian of the Church of England, argued that human beings were made for happiness and virtue, that our nature conduced to both simultaneously, and that by pursuing happiness by means of our highest qualities—reflection and conscience—we satisfied the essentially identical imperatives of our self-interest and our duty. Butler retained a certain Christian dimension to his moral theories, but they were not essential to those theories, which were wholly discernible from nature. Deists who removed that Christian dimension did not depart from Butler's model. Thus the deist Jefferson's claim that it was "self-evident" that we were endowed by God with the right to pursue happiness did not challenge prevailing Christian doctrine.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Explain the link between the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the emergence of the pursuit of happiness as a natural right.
2. Distinguish among various eighteenth-century uses of the term "nature."
3. Describe Bishop Butler's view of human nature and of human unhappiness.
4. Explain why, for Bishop Butler, duty and self-interest coincide.
5. Explain why deistic and Christian moral theologies can be so surprisingly similar in the eighteenth century.

Outline

- I. Increasingly, seventeenth-century thinkers saw the ordered laws of nature as the instruments of God's will, wisdom, and purpose.
 - A. The discoveries of seventeenth-century natural philosophy (science) produced a sense of touching the order and providence of God.
 - B. The new philosophers saw themselves as profoundly pious minds who had chosen to learn God's designs and purposeful intelligence from what God actually had created.
 - C. The new science produced a sense of religious awe in locating God's providence in natural mechanisms themselves. Following the empirically discernible laws of nature meant following the laws of God.
- II. This perception validated physical and secular pleasure as the happiness we had the right, from God, to seek.
 - A. Christian theology distinguished between *beatitudo* (beatitude—blessed reunion with God in life everlasting) and *felicitas* (earthly happiness).
 1. Christian moral theologians long taught that the latter was a fallen, corrupted remnant of the highest calling to pursue beatitude.
 2. In the eighteenth century, that view of *felicitas* changed.
 - B. The governance of mankind by the pursuit of natural, secular pleasure and the flight from natural, secular pain was, if a primary goal, the mark of our sin and of our distance from God. To the extent that it governed our lives, it indicated that we had not raised ourselves or been raised by God to a higher level of being.
 - C. In light of the new philosophy of the seventeenth century, earthly happiness acquired validation.
 1. If the laws and mechanisms of nature were the agencies of divine intention, and if it were a law of nature and a governing mechanism that human beings and all other living creatures sought earthly pleasure and fled earthly pain, then it followed that the pursuit of such pleasure was the divinely ordained end of human life.
 2. The pursuit of happiness was what God himself had chosen for us and had joined to the good.
- III. The distinctions among the various meanings of the "nature" created providentially by God allow us to understand the pious meaning of "following nature."
 - A. The first meaning of "nature" refers to anything empirically observed; it has no moral content. In such a model, all things and phenomena that are not supernatural are natural.
 - B. The second meaning of "nature" refers to nature as the statistical norm.

1. Understood this way, nature might or might not have moral content.
 2. From such a model, it is natural for parents to care for their children; it is unnatural (even if empirically observed) for parents not to care.
- C. Finally, we can understand nature as essence (that which distinguishes the creature from all other things). From this model, it is natural for a human being to use reason—his or her distinguishing trait—in interacting with the world.
- IV. Bishop Joseph Butler used the essentialistic model of human “nature,” in his *Fifteen Sermons on Humane Nature*, to argue that before and independent of Christian revelation, our natural knowledge and the ordinary tendencies of our human nature lead us to virtue.
- A. We must examine and analyze our purposeful design in order to know our nature.
 - B. Our essence is to pursue happiness, governed naturally by reason and conscience.
 - C. Given the reality of divine design, we know that the pursuit of secular happiness, to which our nature impels us, leads us—when we are governed by reason and conscience—to the good.
 1. Against Calvin and Hobbes, he argues that self-love is good and that benevolence and self-love are not in conflict.
 2. We must love ourselves if we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. To say that we should not seek our happiness in this secular, natural world was to criticize the very design of God.
 3. There is no inconsistency whatsoever between moral duty and self-love or self-interest. If it is a law of nature that we were creatures of self-love in pursuit of happiness, then happiness is our literal, God-given birthright and coincident with virtue.
 4. For Butler, there remained a minimal Christian dimension to this purely natural moral theology.
 - a. For the Christian, the achievement of happiness through enlightened and virtuous self-interest was reinforced by eternal reward and by the particular command of Christ.
 - b. Further, the world was not perfect, and the afterlife could make amends for the failure of virtue to secure earthly happiness.
 5. Butler concludes that duty and interest coincide, almost always in this world, but absolutely if we take into account the whole.
- V. Thus deism and new philosophical Christianity moved on the same tidal current of conceptual change. Deism did not alter new philosophical Christianity but simply naturalized categorically the religious component of the pursuit of happiness.

- A. The deist Matthew Tindal made the universal laws of nature—including the human pursuit of natural pleasure and avoidance of natural pain—the sole moral connection between mankind and God.
- B. For Tindal, God not only wanted our happiness, He had defined that happiness, through our nature, in terms of the secular pursuit of knowledge, bodily health, and physical pleasures, none of which could offend God.
- C. It was but a small step from Bishop Butler to the deism of Thomas Jefferson, who indeed could assert that it was self-evident that all human beings were endowed by their Creator with the unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness. In making this assertion, however, Jefferson was not challenging eighteenth-century Christian natural theology, but reaffirming it.

Essential Reading:

Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons on Human Nature*.

Supplementary Reading:

Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy from Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is Butler’s Christian moral philosophy compatible with the Christian notions of sin and original sin?
2. For what theological reasons does Butler wish to preserve a positive view of human nature against Hobbes and Calvin?

Lecture Nineteen

The Skeptical Challenge To Optimism: David Hume

Scope: The first half of the eighteenth century was the high-water mark of confident and optimistic natural philosophy and natural religion. This confidence was built upon the belief that the natural faculties linked our minds to manifest natural truth, and this optimism was built upon the belief that this truth included knowledge of the beneficent and providential designs of God for us. There were diverse challenges to such philosophical optimism—among them, evangelical religious revival and a critical empiricism—but one of the most dramatic and through criticisms came from the Scottish philosopher and philosophical skeptic David Hume, in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

Although the dialogic form in theory commits Hume to no particular position, he gives extraordinary voice to the skeptical Philo, who challenges the fundamental premise of natural religion—that we must infer logically from the data of nature a wise, intelligent, good, omnipotent, and providential God. Philo challenges the very assumption that we can infer the necessary cause of the universe, the analogy between nature and the works of human intelligence, and the inconsistencies between the qualities attributed to God and what we would infer from the operations of nature about the cause of the world. In particular, he argues that the evidence of evil, pain, and suffering does not support such an inference. From Philo's arguments, one might choose to believe in God, but it would not be the product of natural inference in a manner consistent with the new sciences.

With Hume, we see a growing skepticism about the relationship of natural philosophy and religious belief, a skepticism that explains in part the increasing turning away by intellectuals from problems of theology to problems of secular society.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the basic premises of optimistic natural philosophy and natural religion.
2. Summarize Hume's general arguments against the philosophical method of natural religion.
3. Explain why Hume believes we may not infer the attributes of God from the operations of nature.
4. Summarize Hume's treatment of the problem of evil.

Outline

- I. Eighteenth-century optimistic natural philosophy and natural theology were founded on two confident conclusions inherited from the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century.
 - A. The first was the belief that the natural faculties, through the medium of nature, linked human beings to natural truth and to knowledge of God.
 - B. The second was the belief that nature and man interact to the benefit of man, through the providential designs of God.
- II. Natural optimism faced several other challenges.
 - A. The proponents of evangelical religious revival denounced as folly the counsel that human beings should follow the inclinations of their nature. In the evangelical view, this naturalism ignored the reality of depravity, the sin and danger of this-worldliness, and man's absolute dependence upon God.
 - B. Inherent in Locke's empiricism was the skeptical view that knowledge is limited, relative to experience, and, at its best, merely probable.
 - C. Further, Bishop George Berkeley asked how we know that any external world causes, corresponds to, or is represented by our ideas and images, when all we know are our ideas and images?
- III. One of the most dramatic challenges to optimistic natural philosophy and natural theology came from David Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.
 - A. This work challenges the fundamental premise of natural religion: that by inference from the phenomena of nature, we are obliged to infer a cause analogous to a human mind from the order and benevolence of nature, and that this cause is an intelligent, wise, omnipotent, and good God.
 - B. Philo points out in the *Dialogues* that any effort to base religion upon inference from experience has four fatal general flaws.
 1. It leaves religion merely probable at best, since knowledge from experience is not logically necessary but determined by ongoing experience.
 2. It proceeds on the basis of an extremely weak analogy, since the dissimilarities between the universe and the works of men are far more striking than any similarities.
 3. The analogy is vitiated by the fact that the universe is the only one of its kind that we know, and we know it very partially indeed. How scientifically can one draw inferences about its necessary or even probable cause?
 4. To cite the order of the universe is insufficient, since there is also evidence of disorder, and both require explanation by the cause one

assigns. What convinces us that this universe could not have arranged itself by chance?

- C. Even if one granted the terms of the analogy, we would not logically infer from the universe the God of natural religion. By analogizing from the world, we would infer a cause that does not have the qualities of God.
1. God must have no infinity, since the universe has only finite effects.
 2. God must have no perfection, since the world has so many flaws.
 3. God must have no unity, because of the diversity of effects in the world.
 4. God must have no incorporeality, since we only know work to be performed by material agencies, by hands, by bodies.
 5. God must have no intelligence, since the world is not a "machine" requiring an intelligent designer. In fact, the world resembles a vegetable, with growth and decay, more than it does a watch or knitting loom.
 6. God must have no supreme wisdom, since human beings improve on the design of nature, and since change is constant even in nature.
- D. If nature proves the infinite goodness of its cause, then how can we explain the miseries, pains and uncertainties of life? If a parent could save his children from disease, earthquake, plague but chose not to, would we call that parent good and wise?
1. Finite, imperfect human beings could improve upon nature if consulted.
 2. There are only four logical possibilities to be weighed in light of the evidence. The world as we observe it is explicable only if its cause is (as the natural religionists claim) infinitely good, or if it is infinitely evil, or if it is composed of warring opposites of good and evil, or if it is neither good nor evil. The only tenable explanation is that the cause of the universe is indifferent to good or evil.
- E. In short, although one might choose to believe in God, that belief would not arise from the optimistic perspective that our natural faculties, through the medium of nature, know God and God's goodness and should use nature as their moral guide.

Essential Reading:

David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

Supplementary Reading:

David Hume, *A Natural History of Religion*, in *Writings on Religion*.

Questions for Discussion:

1. We know that David Hume claims atheism to be an absurdly dogmatic position. What distinguishes Hume's rejection of natural religion from atheism?
2. Is the marriage of philosophy and religion more dangerous to the former or to the latter?

Lecture Twenty

The Assault Upon Philosophical Optimism: Voltaire

Scope: Another pillar of the philosophical optimism discussed in the previous lecture was the rationalist argument afforded to it by the great philosopher Leibniz, whose *Essais de Theodicee* (Essays on Theodicy) of 1710 sought to prove that God would only have created “the best of all possible worlds,” and thus that all things in the world serve an ultimate good. This philosophical optimism, as paraphrased by Alexander Pope, insisted that “Whatever is, is right.” Linked to the theological empiricism that inferred an infinitely good God from the design of nature, rationalist philosophical optimism reinforced the confidence of natural religion.

By mid-century, there were many reconsiderations of such naturalist optimism, including a rethinking of the issues by Bishop Butler himself. The most influential of these reconsiderations, however, came from the heart of deism itself—from the pen of Voltaire. Obsessing on the problem of evil in the wake of personal and European catastrophes, including the destruction of Lisbon by earthquake, Voltaire wrote a “Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake” that announced the incomprehensibility of evil.

Attacked by Rousseau and others for this work, he replied, after much intellectual paralysis, with his most enduring work, *Candide, or Optimism*. Though often amusing and replete with satire, *Candide* is a dark and serious book that seeks to refute Leibnizian philosophical optimism. According to Voltaire, humanity has needs unmet by theology; philosophical optimism is both fatalistic and inhumane; metaphysics cannot resolve the problem of evil; the world is filled with unredeemed suffering; and the only ease from anguish is to “cultivate” the human garden. *Candide* both reflects and deeply influences the intellectual community’s transition from abstract philosophy to a focus on the human condition.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Summarize the arguments of Leibniz’s theodicy.
2. Explain why the Lisbon earthquake posed such particular philosophical problems to the eighteenth century.
3. Describe Voltaire’s reconsideration of the problem of evil.
4. Explain how *Candide* attempts to refute a complex philosophical system by means of fiction.

5. Distinguish between a skeptical deism, on the one hand, and atheism, on the other.

Outline

- I. Despite Hume’s challenge to the widespread confidence that the data and evidence of nature required one logically to infer a benevolent God as its author, there were also two powerful currents of purely rationalistic analysis of God that reinforced or enhanced optimistic natural philosophy.
 - A. Tindal noted that because God is perfect, He lacks nothing and created the world for our happiness.
 - B. Leibniz’s rationalist theodicy had vast and growing appeal until the mid-eighteenth century. God, being omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good, necessarily created “the best of all possible worlds.”
- II. Bishop Butler also reconsidered the optimistic conclusions of natural theology.
 - A. In *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (published ten years after his optimistic sermons on the providential design of nature), Butler accounted for the affinity between God’s revelation in nature and His supernatural revelation in Scripture by noting that both involved explicability and required a faith that surpassed reason.
 - B. Both nature and scripture give us enough light and explanation to see the hand of God, but both are mysterious enough that we need faith in order to know God affectively.
 - C. As the problem of evil shows, the providence of God is not clear in nature. Faith alone reconciles us to providence.
- III. No apostasy from philosophical and theological optimism was more dramatic or influential, however, than that of Voltaire.
 - A. Voltaire despaired over his personal life, the state of European affairs, and his place within his civilization.
 - B. The destructive Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755 seared his consciousness and deeply affected Europe’s intellectual life.
 1. How can the evil produced by nature’s general laws be reconciled with the providence of God?
 2. In his “Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake,” Voltaire argued that evil is real and incomprehensible. Rather than attempt to understand God, we should devote our love and attention to suffering humanity.
 3. Rousseau responded that Voltaire has “betrayed God’s providence” by doubting that this is the best of all possible worlds.

IV. Voltaire's *Candide*—his most enduring work—constituted his answer to Rousseau and to himself. In it, he attempted to refute Leibnizian philosophical optimism by juxtaposing it, in fiction, against the human condition.

- A. Candide is the student of Pangloss, whose Leibnizian philosophy appears futile, irrelevant, and absurd in the midst of human pain and suffering.
- B. Philosophical optimism equals fatalism; if “whatever is, is right,” then one’s attempts to mitigate suffering do not matter.
- C. Candide voyages through a world of disease, war, cruelty, natural catastrophe, and endless unredeemed human suffering.
- D. Candide’s conclusion is: “Let us cultivate our garden.” The only antidote to pain and despair is to work in the earthly garden, to stave off what suffering and vice we can.
- E. God’s existence is proven by the design of the world, but we do not know that He cares for us.
- F. This conclusion marks a momentous shift from theological or metaphysical concerns to the human condition.

IV. The crisis of confidence through which optimistic natural philosophy and theology passed in the mid-eighteenth century transformed the culture and intellectual life of Western Europe in lasting ways.

- A. Philosophy was displaced.
- B. It became legitimate to refute formal thought by appeal to human experience.
- C. Theology was displaced from the center of intellectual activism.

Essential Reading:

Voltaire, *Candide*

Supplementary Reading:

Voltaire, “Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake”

G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*

Questions for Discussion:

1. Are Hume’s philosophical and Voltaire’s humanistic critiques of optimism complementary or opposed?
2. By the mid-18th century, philosophy and theology are absorbing less and less of reading public’s interest. Given the public’s love of the philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century and its close relationship to theology, how might one explain this fact?

Lecture Twenty-One

The *Philosophes*: The Triumph of the French Enlightenment

Scope: The *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment—a diverse community of thinkers and writers who regarded themselves as “new philosophers”—took as their mission the critical reexamination of knowledge, authority, and institutions. Linked by a shared rejection of inherited authority, an embrace of the seventeenth-century conceptual revolution, the ethical principle of utility, and opposition to the Church, the *philosophes* earned an international audience and won the loyalty of the reading public during the eighteenth century.

A major agency for the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas and attitudes was the vast and commercially successful enterprise of the *Encyclopedie*, published in 28 volumes between 1751 and 1772 under the editorship of Denis Diderot. The *Preliminary Discourse* of the *Encyclopedie*, written by d’Alembert in 1751, called for the wide diffusion and preservation of the ongoing accomplishments of the great rebirth of method and knowledge in the seventeenth century. The *Encyclopedie* drew hundreds of authors and experts into its struggle for freedom of expression, and it sought to bring readers to the frontiers of knowledge in philosophy, science, history, the arts and letters, and technology. The Enlightenment in France polemicized sharply for the new experimental methods, for the principle of utility, and for religious toleration, winning the war for public opinion against its adversaries and itself ascending to privilege in the Old Regime. Far from being a unity, however, the Enlightenment embodied intense debates over political change, the meanings of “nature,” deism and atheism, optimism and pessimism, and elitism and egalitarianism. An endless series of debates is one its profoundest legacies.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the institutions, shared beliefs, and shared values of what is termed “the French Enlightenment.”
2. Summarize the main issues of social contention between the Church and the *philosophes*.
3. Describe the scope and significance of the *Encyclopedie*.
4. Explain the importance of the issue of toleration to the struggle between Church and Enlightenment.
5. Explain some of the most profound debates and tensions within the Enlightenment.

Outline

- I. In mid-eighteenth-century France, a community of thinkers and writers emerged around certain shared attitudes toward the new philosophy, arbitrary authority, and the Church.
 - A. This community saw itself as part of a meritocratic "Republic of Letters."
 - B. This generation thought of itself as leading humanity into a new relationship with nature and with natural human society. Empirically derived knowledge would be applied toward the reduction of human suffering and the increase of human well-being.
 - C. They redefined the meaning of "philosopher" and appropriated the name "*les philosophes*."
 - D. They had diverse social and educational origins, but they shared certain values, interests, and opponents.
 - E. They coalesced around certain institutions—cafes, salons, patrons, academies—and certain ideas.
 1. They rejected inherited authority *per se*.
 2. They were committed, in theory at least, to empirical evidence, rational analysis, and the belief that nature was our sole source of knowledge and values.
 3. They shared the ethical principle of utility: the view that the happiness of the species is the highest value, and that all things may be judged by their contribution either to happiness or to suffering.
- II. Enlightenment thinkers entered into fundamental conflict with the Roman Catholic Church in France. Most were deists and held that God spoke to mankind through nature alone, and that the priests had usurped and falsified God's voice in sectarian religions.
 - A. Their argument with the Church centered on the critical issue of tolerance and censorship.
 - B. It centered on differing histories and analyses of their societies.
 - C. They debated over the status of traditional authority and supernatural claims.
 - D. They argued over the priority of secular over religious concerns.
 - E. Both the *philosophes* and the churchmen regarded each other as their deepest foe.
- III. One of the major agencies of the organization and dissemination of the Enlightenment was the project of the *Encyclopedie*.
 - A. The *Encyclopedie* had its origins in a decision in 1746 to publish a French encyclopedia to compete with British publications. The publisher selected a group of scholars to contribute, and he named as

editors the Enlightenment thinkers Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Denis Diderot.

- B. D'Alembert and Diderot planned a vast work that would be a sanctuary of all acquired knowledge and experience.
 1. In conformity with the Baconian and Lockean vision, the *Encyclopedia* would communicate not simply what we know, but how we came to know it.
 2. It reflected the Enlightenment's expanded notion of significant knowledge: not simply philosophy, but also history, arts and letters, and—most interestingly—technology.
 - C. The *Encyclopedia* was the great publication of the eighteenth century.
 1. It was a runaway best-seller, frequently sold in pirated editions throughout Europe.
 2. It engaged more than 160 writers and some 100 informal consultants, including even some clerical experts.
- IV. The intellectual vision of the *Encyclopedie*.
- A. The tone and agenda were set by d'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse* of 1751.
 1. The seventeenth century had seen a rebirth of knowledge and a qualitative change in human thought.
 2. Knowledge was a human power to understand all natural things and to alter what could be altered.
 - B. The *Encyclopedia* provided a focus and means of diffusion for the new philosophy.
 1. It embodied the need to reset the priorities of knowledge; it contained many articles on inventions but none on Jesus Christ.
 2. It embodied the need to question the origins and foundations of all authorities, beliefs, and institutions.
 3. It embodied the belief—given proper and methodical use of the human mind—in intellectual progress.
 4. It celebrated the dynamism of science, technology, and secular inquiry.
 - C. The *Encyclopedia*, in and of itself, was an education in the need for freedom of inquiry and expression.
 1. Frequently attacked and occasionally suppressed, it drew its authors, experts, and readers into the drama of censorship.
 2. It found agents of collusion and support in the highest structures of the old regime: the courts, aristocracy, and royal ministries.
 3. Its very existence as well as its contents undermined the sacred idols and established intellectual authorities of its culture, and it helped to establish the consciousness of "the party of humanity," or "the party of reason."

V. Enlightenment thinkers claimed that much of existing authority is arbitrary, arising from power and tradition alone. They called upon authority in countless domains to justify itself according to the following criteria.

- A. The first criterion was natural experience.
 - 1. If you change experience, you change the individual.
 - 2. However, the debate over whether the environment or physical constitution has greater impact must be open and empirical, given the commitment to natural experience.
 - 3. Enlightenment thinkers rejected supernaturalism: our knowledge is bounded by natural experience
- B. The other criterion was utility. Happiness is the ultimate ethical criterion, but it initiates some enduring debates between:
 - 1. Individual happiness versus the happiness of society.
 - 2. Physical versus psychological happiness.
 - 3. The debate over whether there is a happiness to virtue itself.
 - 4. Chastellux's solution was to judge a society by the amount of time it permits each individual to pursue his or her own private vision of happiness.

VI. The *philosophes* produced a voluminous literary output between the 1750s and the 1780s.

- A. The Church was placed on the defensive.
- B. The battle cry and most successful issue of the Enlightenment was toleration, which united the diverse tendencies within Enlightenment thought and which won over first public opinion and then the state itself.
 - 1. The case of Marmontel's *Belisaire* represented an Enlightenment victory.
 - 2. Voltaire waged a passionate and ultimately successful campaign against the prosecution, torture, and judicial murders of Calas, Sirven, and La Barre.
- C. The Enlightenment itself rose to privileged status within the *ancien régime*.
- D. The Enlightenment represented a battle for the soul of Europe. Who would advise and teach the culture: the clergy or the secular, naturalist intellectuals?

VII. The Enlightenment also embodied profound tensions and debates.

- A. It sought reform, but by whose agencies?
- B. It counseled people to follow nature but disagreed about the meanings of nature.
- C. It was torn between deism and atheism, between optimism and pessimism, and between elitism and egalitarianism.

Essential Reading:

Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia*.

Supplementary Reading:

Francois-Jean de Chastellux, *On Public Happiness*.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1. Is the Enlightenment a continuation of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century or a new phenomenon of its own revolutionary importance?
- 2. What is the model of the "*philosophe*," of the intellectual, advanced by the Enlightenment?

Lecture Twenty-Two

Beccaria and Enlightened Reform

Scope: The view that both individuals and societies should seek happiness led the eighteenth century to place great weight on the role of the legislator, whose task it was to reconcile the general and particular interest. This brought a great interest in the law. One of the most influential works of the eighteenth century was Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1763), an effort to reform, rationalize, and soften the criminal laws of Europe. The great success of Beccaria's work indicates that he produced a moment of truth in readers who no longer thought in accord with the foundations of many of their institutions. He argued that all legitimate authority among men is secular, derived from the consent of the governed, minimal in its exercise, and justified only by its contribution to human happiness. On the basis of these criteria, Beccaria called for the elimination of theology from the law, the reduction of punishments (including the abolition of torture and the death penalty), clear laws, protection of the accused, rational rules of evidence, and legal equality. His model, and its appeal, indicates the eighteenth century's increased sense of human possibilities: we seek happiness, we can acquire knowledge about the causes of our happiness or suffering, and we may reform institutions in the light of that desire and knowledge.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Explain the exceptional importance of the role of the legislator in eighteenth-century thought.
2. Describe Beccaria's criteria of institutional reform.
3. Summarize the main features of Beccaria's proposals for reform of the criminal law.
4. Explain the significance of the role of judicial discretion in Beccaria's thought.
5. Explain how the major particular reforms urged by Beccaria relate to more general tendencies of eighteenth-century thought.

Outline

- I. From seventeenth- and eighteenth-century models of ego-psychology, the need arose to reconcile the particular and general interests.
 - A. The legislator is charged by law with reconciling these interests. He must find means to prevent certain individuals from interfering with the search for happiness by others.
 - B. The role of criminal law is to preserve the individual's ability to pursue happiness in his own way.
- II. European thinkers in the eighteenth century examined their institutions and codes and found them incompatible with the new philosophy's analysis of the relationship of humanity and nature.
 - A. *On Crimes and Punishments* emerged from a north Italian context. Beccaria was part of the Academy of the Fisiocritici, whose members met to discuss the works of the French Enlightenment.
 - B. The intellectual origins of *On Crimes and Punishments* included the acknowledged influence of the French Enlightenment (especially Montesquieu and Helvetius), as well as notions of "enlightened despotism."
- III. *On Crimes and Punishments* defined the criteria by which to judge institutions and their reform, and it set out a bold plan of necessary reform.
 - A. All issues of government must be based on natural judgment and evidence, not tradition.
 - B. The only just criterion in matters of society is utility, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."
 - C. Society must be understood as a social contract in which individuals give up the least necessary portion of their freedom in return for the greater happiness of safety and civil order.
 1. This conclusion teaches us the legitimate ends and limits of government: because individuals entered society to secure greater happiness, all authority is justified by that result alone.
 2. All law and power must justify itself by demonstrating that it secures the greatest happiness of the greatest number.
 - D. Beccaria's proposed reforms of belief and behavior show the radical potential of rewriting social theory and practice according to his premises.
 1. He seeks to eliminate theology from law, both in defining crimes (categories and severity) and in determining punishment.
 2. All punishment must be minimal and purposeful.

3. To allow us to use our natural faculties to pursue happiness, we need a government of laws, not of men. Beccaria argues insistently against judicial discretion.
 4. The main function of the judicial system is to protect the accused.
 5. Equality before the law must be respected.
- IV. Beccaria's model reflects the eighteenth century's dramatically increased sense of human possibilities with respect to the achievement of happiness, the unprejudicial study of nature, and the use of knowledge to ameliorate human suffering.
- V. This worldview changes how we argue for or against things in the medical as well as in the political world, and it raises profound issues regarding the mastery and order that human beings do or do not have over life. The Enlightenment's legacy involves the drive to learn from experience and to reach decisions based above all else on that learning.

Essential Reading:

Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*

Supplementary Reading:

Elie Halevy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*

Questions for Discussion:

1. In what ways is utility a radical and revolutionary moral criterion in the eighteenth century?
2. What has Western culture accepted and rejected in Beccaria's work?

Lecture Twenty-Three

Rousseau's Dissent

Scope: Rousseau shared much of Enlightenment thought—above all, its Lockeanism, deism, and commitment to religious tolerance—but his critique of “progress” in the arts and sciences and his celebration of the primitive in original nature constituted a major dissent from prevailing Enlightenment beliefs and a major legacy to future Western thought. For Rousseau, cultural “progress” invariably has led to moral decadence, creating artificial needs and artificial inequalities. Society has made us selfish, vicious, weak, arrogant, and unnatural. We blame God for the ills by which we are surrounded and of which we are the authors, misusing the freedom of the will with which God honored us. Humans formed society by some tragic miscalculation of necessity, and it is a permanent state.

The problem, then, is to recognize the depredations of artificial social life and redeem them to the greatest extent possible. This can be done by returning to the religion of nature (deism), by educating the young by the most natural means available (so that they learn directly from nature itself), and by locating legitimate political sovereignty only in the general will that seeks the good of all over the particular good. The legacy of all of these Rousseauist themes is influential and profound, extending to the counter-culture, movements of “return to nature,” Kant's categorical imperative in moral theory, and various benign and not so benign efforts to ground political sovereignty in virtue rather than in numerical majorities.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Describe what links and what separates Rousseau from the French Enlightenment.
2. Explain Rousseau's belief that “progress” and society have removed us from our true nature and made us depraved, artificial beings.
3. Summarize Rousseau's arguments that inequality is artificial, not natural.
4. Explain the connection between Rousseau's deism and his more general philosophy.
5. Describe what Rousseau means by a “natural” education.
6. Explain Rousseau's notion of the “general will.”

Outline

- I. Rousseau exploded onto the European intellectual scene with his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749), in which he argued from history and reason that progress in the arts and sciences has led us away from virtue, lessening rather than increasing it.
 - A. According to Rousseau, history shows us that moral decadence always accompanies cultural progress.
 - 1. The simple societies of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome were overtaken by profound depravity as they became more cultivated and cultured.
 - 2. The simple Swiss and the American Indians compare favorably to the most cultured Europeans in both virtue and happiness, just as the simple Spartans do to the cultured Athenians.
 - B. Reason also shows the linkage between cultural progress and moral decadence.
 - 1. The arts and sciences create and then satisfy artificial vices and human pride, serving luxury and vanity, not our natural needs.
 - 2. They lead to laziness and boredom.
 - C. Rousseau's themes included the celebration of the primitive, the decadence of culture, and the "natural" versus the "artificial."
- II. To understand the development of these themes, we first must understand Rousseau's deism and his defense of providence.
 - A. Rousseau has a passionate and positive deism. He defends the existence and goodness of God against the atheists.
 - 1. He advances a proof of God from motion within a system of inert matter, from the spontaneous motion of living things, and from the ordered and lawful motions of the world.
 - 2. Why do we suffer if God is infinitely good? Rousseau answers that humans, not God, are the source of evil.
 - 3. He emphasizes God's ongoing love and providence.
 - B. Rousseau defends natural religion against the claims and beliefs of revealed religion, especially against the claims of Christianity.
 - 1. What we know of God, we know from nature and reason, both of which are universal and from God.
 - 2. Revelation is defended by claims that God required such a means to teach us how to serve Him, but the diversity of cults and revelations belies the efficaciousness of such means.
 - 3. Christianity confuses the ceremony of religion with the interior adoration of God.
 - 4. Revealed religion gives God human passions.

- 5. Individuals are Christian, Muslim, Jew, or Buddhist merely by the accident of birth and education. Is that how God would reveal Himself to us?
 - 6. All religions claim extraordinary means to prove themselves (miracles, prophecies, grace). It would take a lifetime of scholarship and knowledge of all dead and living languages to evaluate such claims. Is that how God would reveal Himself?
 - C. Rousseau concludes that we should strive to know God through nature and work for that truth. Toleration was the only matter on which he would not compromise.
- III. In his *Second Discourse, On the Origins of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau asks whether inequality is natural.
 - A. Rousseau's lyrical picture of primitive, pre-social humanity informs us of what we have lost as a result of civilization.
 - B. He senses the great tragedy in human history: out of some perceived ephemeral need, we created permanent society.
 - 1. This society is a dominant, coercively triumphant form of human life that sweeps away the morally superior primitive.
 - 2. It introduces unnatural forms that create unnatural relationships: property ownership, division of labor, social inequality, and the imposition first of the strong, then of the rich.
 - 3. Arbitrary power creates and maintains social injustices that we regard as natural, but that are wholly a creation of culture.
 - 4. The attempt to satisfy artificial needs stifles conscience and natural compassion and breeds selfishness. We are separated from our real (God-given) natures as a species.
- IV. Rousseau proposes two means of partial reparation to our ills: education and setting a new moral foundation to politics.
 - A. Education—Rousseau's *Emile* seeks to create the greatest amount of natural learning and inoculation against social depravity.
 - 1. The goal is direct education by nature, not by men or things.
 - 2. Education begins in infancy and proceeds by experience, not by rote or books.
 - 3. Form strong bodies and senses, and develop confidence in them.
 - 4. One should develop the intellect by observation and by promoting reasoning in the service of real needs. Let the student reinvent the sciences to satisfy basic desires, and let him learn morals from natural consequences and mutually beneficial interactions that depend upon ethical principles and relationships.
 - 5. There should be no religious education until adolescence.
 - 6. The student should be taught a useful, honest trade, not a "career."

B. Government—Rousseau argues that a proper understanding of the nature and basis of government can produce moral rather than depraved citizens.

1. Unlike Beccaria's model, Rousseau's social contract insists that all individual freedom is given to the state, such that one's own happiness is one's share of the happiness of the society.
2. When one's self-interest can only be pursued by pursuing the well-being of all others, society becomes a means to overcome selfishness and permit moral beings to exist in civilized society.
3. Only the "general will" has political authority. This has profound democratic implications, since the general will arises from all and applies to all.
4. Legitimacy resides only in the general will, not in an immoral and depraved majority. Thus only the general will is sovereign, not the majority *per se*.
5. Being subject to our moral selves (the general will) forces us to be free and unenslaved to our own or others' artificial power, even while in society.
6. To preserve the general will and the social contract, there must be no factions, no gulf between rich and poor, and no society too large for democratic self-governance.

V. The Rousseauist legacy is always present and always active.

- A. Civilization brings loss and discontent. We have made ourselves unhappy.
- B. There is a species nature which society must seek to restore.
- C. Freedom consists in being governed by the general, not the particular, and by virtue, not self-interest.
- D. Thus the Jacobins and communal counterculture can lay claims to Rousseau.

Essential Reading:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*

Supplementary Reading:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, Books I and II

Questions for Discussion:

1. In what ways does it make sense to think of Rousseau as a defender or as an opponent of the project of the Enlightenment?
2. What aspects of Rousseau's thought have been most appropriated by later thinkers?

Lecture Twenty-Four

Materialism and Naturalism: The Boundaries of the Enlightenment

Scope: The naturalistic materialism and atheism of the late French Enlightenment reveal the boundaries of eighteenth-century thought. Despite the culture's increasing naturalism in practice (in science and in explanations of most phenomena), it still believes that motion, life, and human nature all require spiritualist explanations to some degree and that there is a point of naturalist explanation beyond which one runs the risk of atheism.

The work of La Mettrie sought precisely to establish materialism as the only means of scientific or philosophical explanation, to demonstrate that human beings are not a dualism of body and soul but one organic entity, to prove that the transition from animal to human life was gradual and not categorical, and to show that the evidence of the Life Sciences revealed a matter that was alive and vital in specific organized forms, not inert and passive.

Denis Diderot, in his speculative (and often playful) natural philosophy, went further, explicitly arguing on behalf of atheism in science and philosophy. For Diderot, all matter is potentially alive and moves between organic and inorganic states on the basis of natural organization and catalysts, species have transformed on the basis of spontaneous changes and the survival of the best adapted, and human thought and will are the behaviors of the physical body. The ethical implications of this naturalism for Diderot were that the goal of our ethical systems are survival, pleasure, and utility, and that we depend upon truth for our successful interaction with nature. The kaleidoscopic natural world of Diderot marks the ultimate rejection of the purposeful, qualitative world of Aristotelian scholasticism. With atheism, the debates of the modern age begin in all of their intensity.

Objectives — Upon completion of this lecture, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the ways in which spiritualism persisted strongly in the eighteenth century.
2. Summarize La Mettrie's arguments for extending materialism to the science of man.
3. Distinguish between La Mettrie's metaphysical skepticism and Diderot's atheism.
4. Describe Diderot's view of the transitions between organic and inorganic entities.
5. Explain Diderot's sense of the ethical implications of materialism.

Outline

- I. Despite increasing naturalization of the eighteenth-century scientific world view and the marginalization of any practical spiritualism, there remain two areas in which spiritual explanation remains essential.
 - A. Naturalistic, mechanistic, and materialistic explanations were increasingly used to understand the physics of bodies and the physiology of living things. Spiritualistic explanations of physical behavior were increasingly seen as an admission of ignorance.
 - B. However, metaphysical explanations remained regnant for the origin of acquired motion and the foundation of spontaneous motion.
 - C. Above all, however, the spiritualist explanation of human nature and behavior remained influential.
 1. The human soul was viewed as the essential phenomenon of knowing and choice.
 2. There was a general refusal to extend the model of animal behavior to human beings.
 - D. The stakes of retaining spiritual explanation was high. Without it, Europe faced the specter of categorical naturalism.
 - II. La Mettrie and the emergence of explicit materialistic naturalism in the French Enlightenment.
 - A. La Mettrie was not admired by later French materialists, since he identified sensual pleasure as the ultimate good.
 - B. He had a medical background and deep familiarity with the life sciences. He pursued a total physical medicine that would eliminate spiritual explanations and encompass all aspects of human behavior.
 - III. The following were the primary themes of La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine* (*Machine Man*, or *The Human Mechanism*).
 - A. One must make an absolute choice between spiritualism and materialism: there is no middle ground.
 1. La Mettrie saw much of Greek philosophy as wholly materialistic.
 2. Spiritual explanations are essentially a confession of ignorance and helplessness, an abandonment of inquiry.
 3. Materialism is the possibility of human knowledge and mastery. It is an invitation to human exploration of the human phenomenon; a tearing down of boundaries to science.
 4. Materialism is a strategy of human knowledge, not a metaphysical truth.
 - B. The soul or mind is not distinct from the body, but a behavior of the body.
 1. Physiology has a tremendous impact on our consciousness and will.
 2. Thought and will are correlated to the physiology of the brain and the central nervous system.
 - C. Human beings are not categorically distinct from other animals; the transition from lower animals to man is gradual and founded upon observable physical differences of constitution.
 - D. Matter is not inert and lifeless absent an indivisible soul, but alive and vital in specific organizations.
 - E. La Mettrie concludes that the soul is the effect, not the cause, of the body's behavior. Nature has formed us as organisms capable of thought.
- IV. Denis Diderot's relationship to Enlightenment atheism.
 - A. D'Holbach's circle included Diderot and Naigeon.
 - B. Diderot's atheistic works were published only after his death, although his salons had been preoccupied with his atheist theses.
 - V. Diderot's work displays the following naturalistic themes.
 - A. The crucial issue is the existence or non-existence of God.
 - B. All matter (all nature) is potentially alive.
 1. There is no categorical distinction between the organic and inorganic.
 2. Physical behavior depends upon organization and catalysts.
 3. Time and purely natural agencies transform the living into inorganic and the inorganic into the living.
 4. Life and death are two modes of the same matter.
 5. The hypothesis of God explains nothing, confuses much, and is unnecessary.
 - C. Diderot offers proto-evolutionary speculations on the transformation of the species over time, the survival of the best adapted, the scientific need to abandon the limitations of Scriptural time, and the cells as carriers of the information of each organism.
 - D. Human thought is a scientific, not a theological, mystery.
 - VI. Diderot squarely faces the ethical implications of atheistic naturalism.
 - A. Ethics as behavior is partly inherited, partly learned.
 - B. The goal of ethics is survival and better interaction with nature and ourselves.
 - C. The only ethical criteria are pleasure and utility.
 - D. For Diderot, atheism is proper humility.
 - E. Atheism is the ultimate humanism.

VII. Conclusion

- A. Naturalism is the ultimate overthrow of the Aristotelian scholastic system.
- B. Naturalism asks to be judged less on philosophical than on historical grounds.
- C. In an unplanned universe that does not care for us, there exists the need to coexist with nature and with each other and to build human well-being.
- D. The debates of the modern age begin in all of their intensity.

Essential Reading:

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man*, in Ann Thomson, ed., *La Mettrie: Machine Man and Other Writings*

Denis Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*

Supplementary Reading:

Alan Charles Kors, "The Atheism of d'Holbach and Naigeon," in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, editors, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, pp. 273-300.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1. Does scientific naturalism in any way demand atheism as its philosophical complement?
- 2. Is Diderot one logical conclusion of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or is he the beginning of something essentially new?

Timeline

- 1543.....Publication of Copernicus's heliocentric theory
- 1561.....Birth of Francis Bacon
- 1564.....Birth of Galileo
- 1571.....Birth of Kepler
- 1588.....The defeat of the Spanish Armada; the birth of Thomas Hobbes
- 1596.....Birth of Descartes
- 1598.....Edict of Nantes in France grants limited toleration to the Huguenots (French Calvinists)
- 1605.....Publication of Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*
- 1609.....Kepler publishes his *Astronomia Nova*, asserting the elliptical orbit of Mars
- 1618.....Bacon becomes Lord Chancellor of England; beginning of the Thirty Year War in Europe
- 1620.....Publication of Bacon's *Novum Organum*
- 1621.....Bacon disgraced for bribery and returns to private life and thought
- 1623.....Birth of Pascal
- 1626.....Death of Francis Bacon
- 1628.....Death of Kepler
- 1632.....Birth of Locke
- 1637.....Publication of Descartes's *Discourse on Method*
- 1641.....Publication of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*
- 1642.....Civil War begins in England; Galileo's death in his ninth year of home imprisonment
- 1643.....Birth of Newton
- 1647.....Birth of Bayle
- 1649.....Execution of King Charles I in England
- 1650.....Death of Descartes
- 1651.....Publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan*
- 1654.....Deep ties of Pascal with Jansenism; he moves to the community at Port-Royal
- 1660.....Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in England; Hobbes returns to favor
- 1662.....Death of Pascal; discovery of his notes for a defense of the Christian faith, soon published as his *Pensées*
- 1663.....Formation of the Royal Society in England

- 1666-1668....Newton's 18 months in Woolesthorpe, changing the history of human thought
- 1679.....Death of Hobbes.
- 1681.....Bayle takes refuge among French Huguenots in Rotterdam, all fleeing from persecution of Protestantism in France
- 1685.....Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, formally and officially ending all toleration of Protestantism in France
- 1687.....Publication, in Latin, of Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*
- 1689.....Birth of Montesquieu
- 1690.....Publication of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and of his *Two Treatises of Government*
- 1692.....Birth of Joseph Butler
- 1694.....Birth of Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet)
- 1695.....Publication of Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*
- 1697.....Publication of the first edition of Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, which will be frequently revised and republished
- 1704.....Death of Locke
- 1706.....Death of Bayle
- 1709.....Birth of La Mettrie
- 1711.....Birth of Hume
- 1712.....Birth of Rousseau
- 1713.....Birth of Diderot
- 1715.....Death of Louis XIV in France
- 1721.....Publication and great success of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*
- 1726.....Publication of Butler's *Sermons on Human Nature*
- 1727.....Death of Newton; buried in Westminster Abbey
- 1734.....Publication and scandal of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters*
- 1736.....Concerned about the growth of disbelief, Butler publishes his *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*
- 1738.....Butler elevated to bishop in the Church of England; birth of Beccaria in Milan
- 1740.....Publication of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*
- 1746.....Diderot becomes editor of the *Encyclopedie*
- 1747.....Publication of La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine*
- 1748.....Publication of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and of Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

- 1750.....Publication of Rousseau's First "Discourse," *on the Arts and Sciences*
- 1751.....Publication of Voltaire's *History of the Century of Louis XIV*, of d'Alembert's *Discours Preliminaire*, and of Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.
- 1751-1772....Publication of the *Encyclopedie*
- 1752.....Death of Butler
- 1755.....Death of Montesquieu; publication of Rousseau's Second "Discourse," *On the Origins of Inequality*
- 1759.....Publication of Voltaire's *Candide*
- 1762.....Rousseau publishes both *Emile* and *The Social Contract*; he must flee from Paris because of his criticism of Christianity in the *Emile*
- 1764.....Publication Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments*
- 1770.....Publication of the baron d'Holbach's explicitly atheistic *System of Nature*
- 1773.....Catherine the Great of Russia offers lifetime financial assistance to Diderot
- 1776.....Death of Hume; outbreak of the American War of Independence
- 1778.....Death of Voltaire amidst celebrations honoring him in Paris
- 1778.....Death of Rousseau
- 1784.....Death of Diderot
- 1789.....Outbreak of the French Revolution
- 1794.....Death of Beccaria

Glossary

anthropomorphism: the attribution to God of the qualities of human beings.

anticlericalism: the belief that the religious, social, or political influence of the clergy is harmful and should be restrained.

apologetics: defense by argument, most often of the Christian faith.

Cartesian: pertaining to Descartes or to his followers.

corporeal: relating to matter and to physical properties.

deduction: reasoning from the general to the particular or from premises to what follows logically from those premises.

determinism: the philosophical doctrine that all actions, including all human actions, are controlled absolutely by prior causes and are not subject either to chance or to free will.

disputatio: the model of teaching, examination, and argument that dominated medieval and early modern universities in Europe, based upon authority and logical deduction from received authorities.

dualism: the philosophical opinion that reality, and, in particular, the human being, is divided into two distinct and irreconcilable substances, body and soul.

empiricism: the philosophical doctrine that all knowledge arises from experience and that what cannot be confirmed by experience is not known (or naturally known).

epistemology: the theory or science of the origins, nature, limits, and validity of knowledge.

essence: the property or properties without which a thing would cease to be what it is.

fatalism: the belief that events are predetermined and that no human action can alter the course of things.

fideism: a religious form of philosophical skepticism that views the uncertainty and weakness of natural human knowledge as an indication of the necessity of faith.

geocentric: a system of astronomy in which the earth is the center of the cosmos.

heliocentric: a system of astronomy in which the sun is the center.

hyperbolic: excessive.

idealism: the philosophical doctrine that thought has as its object ideas rather than material objects.

immutable: not subject to or incapable of natural change.

induction: reasoning from the particular to the general or from a number of common facts to a general conclusion.

Jansenism: a movement within early modern European Catholicism that emphasized the texts of Saint Augustine that most stressed predestination and the need for personal and unmerited grace.

Latitudinarianism: a movement within the early modern Church of England that accepted the appropriateness of wide differences of belief, ritual, and Scriptural interpretation within Christianity.

malleability: the quality of being changed in form or ways of being by external influences.

Manichean heresy: the belief that the universe is governed by opposing and equal forces of good and evil.

materialism: the philosophical theory that matter is the only (or only knowable) substance in the universe.

mechanism: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the philosophical theory that the operations of the universe can be explained by matter-in-motion acting according to the laws of physics.

metaphysics: the branch of philosophy dealing with first principles and the real nature of things.

mutable: subject to or capable of natural change.

naturalism: in philosophy, the belief that there are no supernatural beings or causes in the world.

objective being: in Cartesian philosophy, that which is represented by an idea.

occult force: in certain systems of philosophy, and particularly in scholasticism, a natural cause (of a phenomenon) that is beyond the range of perception.

ontology: the theory or science of being and of the essence of things.

optics: the science of the nature and laws of light.

Pyrrhonism: named after the Greek skeptic Pyrrho, an extreme form of philosophical skepticism, best known for its doubt that even the proposition "Nothing can be known with certainty" could be known with certainty.

qualitative: pertaining to quality, and, in early modern philosophy, essence.

quantitative: pertaining to quantity and measurement.

rationalism: the philosophical doctrine that all true knowledge is found by reason alone, independent of the senses.

relativism: the philosophical doctrine that what we know and believe about things is relative to time, place, and circumstance.

scholasticism: a system of thought arising from the fusion of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology that dominated the schools of Europe from the late fourteenth century until the end of the seventeenth century.

sensationalism: the philosophical doctrine that all ideas (or all knowledge) are acquired by means of the senses.

skepticism: the philosophical theory that nothing can be known with certainty.