Chapter Eight
Modern Philosophy

Key Words:
Renaissance, Humanism, epistemology, rationalism, empiricism, knowledge.

Introduction

Philosophical movements are phenomena of effective history, says Habermas. (Habermas: Postmetaphysical Thinking). Modern philosophy is thus the result of several historical and social developments that had radical impacts in the lives of European people. The term modern comes from the Latin word modo, which means what is current. In this sense the term modern only suggests the separation of the contemporary age from the ancient. But when we speak about modern philosophy, we refer to certain developments in the field of philosophy, as a result of the impact of various other developments in culture and civilization happened during a specific period of time in European history.

This specific period has certain definite features which make it stand out clearly in the history of Europe. This period has witnessed a diminishing authority of the Church and an increasing authority of science. Europe had begun to define itself more on political and national lines rather than religious lines and States have started replacing the Church as authority that controls culture. The French and American revolutions which had very momentous impacts occurred during this time and nations were in the path of democratization.

From Ancient to Middle Ages

With the Barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire, an era of great ancient civilizations had come to an end in Europe. By the 5th century, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman empire and the Church had become the most powerful organization in Europe [Lavine]. This has resulted in the complete domination of Christianity as an institution based on unquestionable faith and rigid dogmas in the place of the free, rational, independent philosophical thinking of the Greeks. Consequently, the Church had destroyed many writings and works of art of the ancient civilization charging them for being pagan, un-
Christian and immoral and had given birth to a new civilization with redefined social, cultural, economic and political domains all over the European continent.

The passage from the ancient Greek to Christian worldview was actually a retreat from the rational to supernatural and from the logical to the revelational. This period had replaced critical thinking with faith and loyalty to the doctrines of the Church. It therefore, replaced science by superstition. Most of the philosophical contemplations of this age were confined to the problems related to the rational justification of faith and God’s existence.

**Modern Philosophy**

Bertrand Russell observes that the period of history which is commonly called “modern” has a mental outlook which differs from that of the medieval period in many ways. Of these, two are the most important: the diminishing authority of the Church, and the increasing authority of science. [A History of Western Philosophy].

An important historical event that has happened during this period in European cultural life was the advent of the Renaissance [the French word for rebirth]. It is generally accepted that the modern outlook began in Italy with Renaissance. The Renaissance actually consist in the revival of the ancient wisdom of the Greek and Roman civilization in the modern age. The intellectuals and creative artists of this period have recognized that the ancient wisdom of the Greeks and the Romans is the source of valuable insights that have the potential to change the course of human life in a drastic manner.

The term Renaissance stands for a period in European history spanning from the middle of the 14th century to the beginning of the 17th century. By 15th century the original Greek works were read and appreciated. Thinkers have also read critically appreciated and St. Thomas’ interpretations of Aristotle. The recovery of the classical languages, literature, art, history and philosophical insights resulted in the revival of the spirit of Greek humanism, which considered the recognition of the dignity and worth of human beings as central. Humanism acknowledges the power of human reason to know the truths of nature and conceives humans as having the capacity to determine, express, and achieve what is good for us.
The Idea of the Good remained a core concern of the Greek civilization. The participation in the life of the city-states and the social and the political life that existed during that period determined the conception of the Good held by the Greeks. An entirely different conception of the good was prevalent during the Middle Ages, where to live according to the dictums of the Church was considered as primordial.

Renaissance, on the other hand, as we have seen above, consists in the revival of the ancient wisdom and humanistic spirit. It aimed at restoring to man the capacities, strengths and powers of the individual person which the middle ages had ignored. It has recognized the dignity of man in terms of his individual achievements, and not necessarily in terms of his divine allegiance. The Renaissance thus considered the culture of the ancient world as superior to the present one and had looked ahead to a new mode of life.

This period was also marked with the rise of modern science. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton were the pre-eminent scientists of this era. Copernicus’ heliocentric view of the universe has overthrown existing paradigms and Kepler came up with mathematical interpretations of the heliocentric view. Galileo developed the observation method with mathematical interpretations to new heights and with the emergence of modern science, the belief/faith-based world views were increasingly replaced by the reason-based scientific outlook. Copernicus and Galileo brought together the two important elements of scientific method: the empirical method that emphasizes on observation and experiment and the rational approach that uses the principle behind the mathematical deductive reasoning.

**Philosophy during the Renaissance**

Though Renaissance was a period that witnessed intense developments in many fields, it was not a very rich period for philosophy. This period had witnessed a revived study of Plato, over Aristotle. As Russell observes, Renaissance encouraged the habit of regarding intellectual activity as a delightful social adventure, not a cloistered meditation aiming at the preservation of a predetermined orthodoxy [*A History of western Philosophy*]

One major development happened during this period was the challenge Saint Thomas’s interpretation of Aristotle faced from different quarters. Aristotle
was studied with more emphasis on secular and scientific aspects, independent of the dominant Scholastic interpretations. Platonism, Stoicism, Epicurianism and Skepticism were also reintroduced during this period. The authority of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire began to decline during this time and it encouraged having a new look at the philosophical issues, ancient philosophy texts and approaches. As T.Z.Lavine observes:

> With the coming of the Renaissance there occurs an expression of a humanistic faith in man, in his power to direct his life and the life of his society toward freedom and justice, together with the sense that this power, which had been a possession of the individual in the ancient Greek world, had been lost in the world of medieval Christendom. [From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophical Quest.]

**Cultural Impact**

Art and literature played a crucial role in forming the cultural and intellectual environment of this era. It was during this time both art and literature became independent of religious dogmas and mythology and artists exhibited the courage in portraying human glory and not just suffering and death as it used to be earlier. In other words, art and literature turned away from Christian themes to nature as it is seen and perceived by man. Nature became an interesting object of study and had been conceived not just as an expression of the supernatural. The human body has also become an object of artistic imagination as a result of the overcoming of the body-negativism that dominated European culture since the time of Plato and became strong during the middle ages.

This was also an age of scientific and other discoveries that enabled man’s understanding the world with having better control over it. There were many new inventions and discoveries that enabled men to dominate nature, which also include other people in far away continents. The discovery of the New World by Columbus is an example. Along with such developments in the scientific, economic and political realms, Europe also witnessed the rise and growth of the Protestant reformation of Christian religion, sphereheaded by Martin Luther.

The philosophical temperament of this age was thus characterised by the scientific temper, humanism and skepticism. It was predominantly concerned with epistemological questions, which dealt with the sources, kinds and limits of human knowledge. In the ethical domain, it sought to discover the criteria and the possibility of moral life without religious principles. The modern age was
thus characterised by an awakening of the reflective spirit and the critical approaches that doubted and questioned all forms of authority particularly the authority of tradition. It was visibly against absolutism and collectivism and asserted the importance of freedom in thought, feeling and action.

In the political realm, states increasingly took the place of the Church and have moved more towards constitutionalism and the creation of more and more democratic institutions. Another important feature of this age was the emergence of individualism and an associated ideal of liberalism. Modern philosophy has emerged in such a social and political environment.

**Modern Philosophy**

The most important feature of modern philosophy is the emergence of reason as the sole arbiter in matters of knowledge and life. It becomes the only authority in philosophy and science and consequently the concept of truth was associated with the notion of scientific observation. Truth needs to be achieved through free and impartial inquiry and in this context theology, which considers revealed knowledge as paramount lost its importance. This age emphasized the practical applicability of knowledge.

In many respects, modern philosophy resembles ancient Greek thought. Like the latter modern philosophy too emphasized on an independent search for truth and was thoroughly rationalistic, as it considered human reason is the highest authority. It was naturalistic, as it attempted explaining the inner and outer nature without supernatural presuppositions. It was scientific, as it has very close ties with the new sciences that were emerging [Frank Thilly]

Modern Philosophy has also witnessed the emergence of two important epistemological schools of thought—rationalism and Empiricism—as independent and opposing schools of philosophy. The impact of modern scientific understanding on philosophy was quite visible, as both these schools were preoccupied with the question of rational genuine knowledge. With these two schools, philosophy regained its lost status as a foundational discipline. They have conceived and equated philosophy with epistemology.

With its focus shifting to epistemology, philosophy’s objectives too had changed. It now no longer deals with the question of ultimate reality, as the ancient and medieval thinkers were doing. According to these thinkers,
philosophy deals with knowledge in a peculiar manner. While scientific disciplines are concerned with knowledge of a particular aspect or domain of the universe, philosophy deals with knowledge as such. Hence it is concerned with the nature, kinds, limitations and sources of knowledge.

**Empiricism and Rationalism**

Being the two important schools of modern philosophy, rationalism and empiricism have different and opposing conceptions of and views about the source of knowledge. Rationalism holds the view that genuine knowledge consists of universal and necessary judgements. According to them, the goal of thought is a system of truths in which the different propositions are logically related to one another. They thus advocate a mathematical conception of knowledge and hold that the origin of knowledge is not sense perception, but has foundation in thought or reason. The rationalists believe that certain truths are natural or native—innate—to reason and are a priori. They treat reason and intuition as the sources of genuine knowledge and not sensation and experience. Further they consider all or most ideas as innate rather than adventitious and hold that the goal of enquiry is certain knowledge and not something, which is merely probable. The founder of the rationalistic school, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) raised the question of knowledge in an unprecedented manner. He asked the question, “what do I really know?” and to find an answer to this he relies on his own intellectual resources. His method thus consists in the overcoming of skepticism and further aims at establishing the autonomy of science.

Empiricism, on the other hand, considers sense perception as the fundamental source of all knowledge, they intend to show that there are no inborn or innate truths and there are no propositions that yield necessary or absolute knowledge. John Locke (1632-1704), for instance, who is the founder of the British empiricist school, vehemently opposes the conception of innate ideas and asserts that all knowledge starts with experience. He claims that the human mind is a *tabula rasa* or an empty cabinet in the beginning and it is experience that will start writing on it.

Both rationalism and empiricism affirm that reason is a faculty of the mind through which truths about reality are known. With regard to the question of the source of knowledge they disagree. But neither of them affirms that all
knowledge comes from sense experience. Even the empiricists acknowledge that there is some knowledge that does not derive from experience.

Though the dominant philosophical schools in the modern age were rationalism and empiricism, other tendencies were also prevalent during this age. With the radical empiricist philosophy of David Hume, skepticism became prominent. Mysticism was another trend which dominated this age. The Catholic scholars preserved the Scholastic philosophy.

It will be interesting to have an account of the development of philosophy from the Greek golden age to the modern period. The decline of the Greek-Roman civilization was actually a decline of freethinking. As we have seen in a previous chapter, the emergence of the Christian Church as the highest authority that controls culture happened during the middle ages which are also called the dark ages.

Quiz

1. What characterized the ancient Greek civilization’s conception of good life?
   (1) The inculcation of the idea of universal goodness  (b) The idea of divine will  (c) The participation in the life of the city-states  (d) The notion of Eudeimonia.

2. Renaissance consists in:
   (a) The rejection of ancient wisdom  (b) The revival of the humanistic spirit  (c) The revival of the Christian belief  (d) The assertion of the superiority of religious doctrines.

3. What is the most important feature of modern philosophy?
   (a) Emergence of humanism  (b) Emergence of individualism  (c) Emergence of reason as the ultimate criteria  (d) The adoption of scientific method in philosophy.

4. What was the fundamental philosophical problem addressed by modern philosophers?
   (a) Problem of knowledge  (b) Problem of ultimate reality  (c) The problem of good life  (d) Ontological problems.

5. Which of the following view does the rationalists not hold?
   (a) Knowledge consists of universal and necessary judgements  (b) Mathematical conception of knowledge  (c) Knowledge has its foundation in reason  (d) All knowledge is a posteriori.

6. Who claimed that the human mind is an empty cabinet at the beginning?
   (a) Descartes  (b) Locke  (c) Kant  (d) Plato

Answer Key:

1. (c)
References and Further Reading

Books

Web Resources
3. http://www.utm.edu/staff/jfieser/class/110/7-rationalism.htm