

Philosophy for revolution Session 6: Early Enlighteners

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Hello again. In this session we'll look at how Scotland and England weighed in as the homes of modern materialism

We can view the evolution of philosophy in a great sweep following the Renaissance, which means "re-birth". It was the time, roughly between 1400 and 1600, which saw a cultural transformation throughout Europe, particularly in Italy. We caught a glimpse of this in the previous session. Raphael's frescoes in the Pope's palace were made in 1508, around the same time as Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling.

The 17th century saw equally profound changes in thought.

We'll take a quick look at the pre-history, which naturally began within the sphere of religious thought and theology, given that most education and knowledge was in the hands of the church.

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The Franciscan friar Duns Scotus, who lived in the 13th century, seen on the left, was born in Scotland and educated in Oxford.

Duns Scotus asked the question: Is it possible for matter to think? This was astonishing because religion taught that our souls are implanted into our bodies by God and not as arising from nature or human beings. This early challenge to the authority of God came from within the heart of the church itself.

In 1517 a challenge to the thought control exercised by Roman Catholicism came from the mind of a German monk, Martin Luther, who posted 95 Theses on a church door. He denounced the church hierarchy, heralding the Protestant Reformation. Luther, Karl Marx wrote, "shattered faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith . . ."

On the right you can see Jacob Böhme, a shoemaker who was a self-taught Protestant theologian and mystic born in 1575. We mention him here, because his writings enraged his contemporaries, who attacked him as blasphemous.

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We can locate the beginnings of scientific thought in England, pioneered by Francis Bacon (1561-1626). He was a philosopher as well as leading statesman at the courts of Queen Mary and Elizabeth I. Bacon's view of matter was a less mystical counterpart to the thinking of Jacob Böhme. Bacon saw matter in motion, characterised by impulse,

life spirit

and tension.

"the living individualising *forces of being* [are] inherent in matter", was how Marx and Engels put it.

Thus, for Bacon... matter smiled at man with poetical sensuous brightness.

Bacon understood science as offering the possibility of understanding the natural world and thus being able to control and master it. For him, science was experimental

and consisted of applying a rational method to the data provided by the senses.

He made enemies and was found guilty of corruption and imprisoned in the Tower of London. He wrote many essays intended to reform and re-organise human thought – which he called the Great

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Instauration (“Innovation”). In this, he attacked the stumbling blocks that hindered an objective study of nature. He described such obstructions as “false idols”.

His most famous statement is said to be that “knowledge is power”. No limits were set on it. He is considered the father-figure of empirical research.

Bacon’s pioneering of direct observation and the knowledge derived from it can be seen as undermining the old feudal hierarchies.

Bacon tended to relegate divine intervention to a long-past historical epoch. This provided an underpinning for the struggle by Parliament against the arbitrary rule of a monarch. He tried to develop law into a scientific discipline which favoured citizens determining law rather than the king.

We’ve focused here on Bacon, but the 17th century as a whole is peopled with extraordinary thinkers, including women. For example, there was the aristocratic Lady Anne Conway, seen on the right, who developed what we now call *vitalist* concepts of *being* and *substance monism*. More on these in the next session.

She challenged protagonists of dualism like Henry More in Britain and Rene Descartes on the continent.

Slide 5: Hobbes and the English revolution

The powerful forces behind this ferment in philosophy and science were the revolutionary upheavals of 17th century Holland and England. In these northern states, the power of the feudal hierarchies associated with the Roman Catholic church was challenged and overthrown.

As a strand within materialist thought, Bacon was followed by his secretary, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes gave an account of human nature as an unending struggle of man against man. To remedy this, he proposed surrendering our rights to the authority of an absolute monarch as part of a commonwealth.

Hobbes argued in his book *Leviathan*^[1] that, without government, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”^[2]

He asserted the need for a strong state and rulers but at the same time he said the state had to defend the people. So, he was an authoritarian in politics and but also a revolutionary thinker because until then monarchs were thought to have authority because they were appointed by god and not by the people.

Thus, Hobbes infuriated both sides. The Church was angry because Hobbes said the King was in charge of interpreting scripture. On the other hand, he angered the monarchists, by saying that the power of the King could only be granted by the people.

Struggles over religious interpretation were a reflection within thought of the growing economic and political challenges to the old hierarchies of church and state. And these thinkers, while being part of the political and philosophical establishment of their day, spurred on social and political transformations.

Rejecting the authority of church and monarchy gave people confidence to make the English revolution of 1642 to 1651, led by Oliver Cromwell. This overthrew the King and established a commonwealth. Between 1649 and 1660 [England](#) (including [Wales](#)) and later Ireland and [Scotland](#) were governed as a republic.

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Slide 6: Empiricism: Locke, Berkeley and Hume

John Locke, who lived between 1632–1704, is considered to be yet another father of modern empiricism as well as the philosopher of the Restoration. “I feel therefore I am”, can be a way of summing up Locke’s ideas.

He argued that experience was the sole source of ideas. This was due to the influence of external objects on our sense organs, or through our attention being directed to the ideas of reflection. For these experiences to become knowledge, we must go through reasoning. He provided a justification for the bourgeois revolution against the Monarchy by saying that people could change the social system if it did not provide for education and development.

Locke had a major influence on French philosophy, for example the notion of *bon sens*, common sense, put forward by Etienne Condillac and Claude Helvetius. Some writers believe that Locke’s work made the French and American revolutions possible. His political philosophy developed in opposition to the policies and practices of the court of King Charles II. He argued against slavery and in 1675, with his patron, Lord Shaftesbury, published a book challenging the power of the king. Shaftesbury was locked up in the tower without trial and Locke had to flee to France for his safety.

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Locke’s ideas also influenced the Anglo-Irish philosopher, Bishop Berkeley and Scot David Hume, the two great figures in empiricism and the sceptical tradition who we met in the Toolbox session.

You’ll recall that Berkeley said that things only exist in so far as we perceive them. Ideas are perceived by our soul and can only exist in the mind, but also in the mind of God. He attacked the concept of matter, including Newton’s theory of space and gravity. He said: “the only thing whose existence we deny, is that which philosophers call Matter or corporeal substance. And in doing of this, there is no damage done to the rest of mankind, who, I dare say, will never miss it.”

Hume, on the other hand, considered that we could not know if the world exists beyond our senses. Knowledge is only worthwhile if it was mathematical or practical in real life. The only source of certainty was faith, although he denied doctrines about God. Experience does not give you real knowledge, just a “custom”.

Hume can be understood as being between the camp of materialism and that of idealism. Wavering between them can indeed be described as the *line* of Hume in modern philosophy. This is known as “agnosticism”, which means uncertainty about whether God, or indeed reality, is knowable.

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Here are some of the achievements as well as challenges posed by the early materialists and empiricists.

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So, we can end this session with a glimpse of people who until recently have been excluded from the mainstream – not men and not European.

In the resources, you can find a timeline of thinkers in the 17th century.

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In the next section, we’ll look at two important thinkers, Rene Descartes and Baruch Spinoza, who also revolutionised thought in the 17th century – but in new directions.