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THE CONCEPT OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
PHILOSOPHY

I

THE HISTORY OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY: HISTORY OR PHILOSOPHY?

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The history of eighteenth-century philosophy is a subject with its own history. However, the idea of what constitutes eighteenth-century philosophy has been remarkably stable over the two centuries that have elapsed since the period in question, and this stability has obscured the simple fact of its historicity and made it peculiarly difficult to question the historical adequacy of that idea. What is more, even now, when detailed scholarship has undertaken such questioning in earnest, tradition is so strong that works of synthesis and overview – not to mention teaching – have to pay it considerable respect in order to find an identifiable audience.

During the last two centuries, two factors above all have lent the philosophy of the eighteenth century an identity, other than its place in time, and these two factors have often reinforced each other. One is the idea that the philosophy in question is the core of a wider cultural and social movement, namely ‘the Enlightenment’. The other is that the eighteenth century has to be seen as part of – in fact, as the high point of – a development of early-modern philosophy from Francis Bacon and René Descartes to Thomas Reid and Immanuel Kant.

I. THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND PHILOSOPHY

The attempt to identify the philosophy of the eighteenth century by means of the Enlightenment is as inadequate as it is popular. Apart from the danger of tautology – namely that the philosophy of the eighteenth century is the philosophy of the Enlightenment because the Enlightenment is the eighteenth century – the concept of Enlightenment is either too wide or too narrow to capture the philosophical riches of the century. It is too wide when it reflects the scholarship of the last half century, which has made the Enlightenment into an ever more

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complex phenomenon that, it has been suggested, cannot be talked about in the singular since it makes sense to talk not only of any number of national Enlightenments but also of provincial, professional, popular, confessional, and several other Enlightenments.¹ Furthermore, modern scholarship has widened the idea of Enlightenment far beyond what can be recognised as in any sense a philosophical culture. While this in itself has proved to be an enormous enrichment of historical scholarship and cultural debate, it clearly makes the concept of Enlightenment useless as a tool for identifying a coherent philosophy. On the contrary, such work has a tendency to reinforce a pluralistic understanding of eighteenth-century philosophy, a topic we will return to.

If contemporary scholarship has rendered the concept of Enlightenment too wide to characterise a philosophy, traditional polemics has given us an idea too narrow and primitive to serve the purpose. The idea of Enlightenment as a style of thinking and as a cultural process that were typical of, but not exclusive to, the eighteenth century was common in European debate at the turn of that century under such labels as *Aufklärung*, *eclaircissement*, and illumination, but the idea of the Enlightenment as a particular period was slower to take hold, apparently first in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's lectures in Berlin in the 1820s on the history of philosophy and on the philosophy of history, and it was not until 1910 that the idea of the period secured – and was secured by – its present English label.² The French period-concept of *le siècle des lumières* was largely parochial, referring to a relatively small group of Paris intellectuals who were active during a forty-year period from the late 1740s until the Revolution of 1789, but this was just the most extreme case of the general problem with the traditional narrow understanding of the Enlightenment.

For more than two centuries, it has been those critical of one or another aspect of eighteenth-century thought who have taken the lead in shaping the concept of the Enlightenment. We may mention three particularly important episodes here. First, the immediate reaction to the French Revolution across Europe included rejection of the French *philosophes* who had been invoked by the revolutionaries, and this rejection had its parallel in the three remarkable series of philosophical lectures that signalled a new era in Britain, France, and Germany, those by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1818), Victor Cousin (1815), and Hegel (1805, or, at least, in the 1820s), to which we will return. This criticism had a shaping influence on the idea of the Enlightenment's political and religious tenor and French focus, and was so forceful that even thinkers whom we might consider cognate spirits with much of the Enlightenment, such as John Stuart Mill, accepted it. The fact that the *philosophes* on the whole had cautioned against revolution – and that those of them who lived long enough had rejected the great Revolution³ – made no difference, and it still makes little difference.

Secondly, German scholarship from the 1870s onwards invented the idea that German culture from the 1770s to the 1830s had made a decisive break with earlier European culture, especially that of the 'West', meaning France and Britain and their derivatives in Germany itself. This fault line came to be seen as the division between Enlightenment on one hand and Romanticism, historicism, and idealism on the other. Friedrich Meinecke's *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936) was a late expression and summary of this scholarship; in it, Meinecke saw the German supersession of the Enlightenment as a second Reformation, which he, significantly, called *Die deutsche Bewegung* (the German Movement).⁴ It is a line of thinking that has had a curiously extended life in the English-speaking world thanks to the influence of Sir Isaiah Berlin, who, however, shifted the historical parallels and saw the German Movement as a 'Counter-Enlightenment'.⁵ But, whatever the labels, it was a thin Enlightenment that was left once the German Movement had deprived it of thinkers such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried von Herder.⁶

Both of the episodes mentioned here portray an Enlightenment that is quite limited. It was either purely French or heavily derived from French ideas, and it was a relatively brief period in European history, well short of the full eighteenth century. A third episode in the saga of how the common idea of the Enlightenment has been shaped by its enemies, namely late twentieth-century post-modernism, has tended in the opposite direction. Here the Enlightenment is often stretched to mean something like 'leading features of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectual culture in Europe'. As has been pointed out, in this approach

utility trumps chronology: certain thinkers prove irresistible to critics of the Enlightenment project because they offer more forceful formulations of what are assumed to be central components of the project than can typically be found among thinkers whose works fall more squarely within the historical Enlightenment. Bacon is irreplaceable as an advocate for the scientific domination of nature, Hobbes is priceless as a representative of that individualist, rights- and contract-centered theory that critics assume lies at the heart of Enlightenment political thought, and Descartes serves as the epitome of that foundationalist and subject-centered conception of reason that philosophers have spent most of this century dismantling.⁷

At the same time, it is common in the post-modernist image of the Enlightenment to take Kant as the exemplary representative. The extreme vagueness concerning the who, where, and when of the Enlightenment is, it has been shown, easily matched by the characterisation of its intellectual content.⁸ However, post-modernism shares with its critical predecessors the idea that the Enlightenment in one way or another was characterised by a very narrow outlook on

human life.⁹ In this regard, the most common charges are rationalism (meaning intellectualism) at the expense of passion and imagination; the idea of a universal human nature, to the detriment of individuality; individualism, disregarding social and spiritual holism; scientific generalising, in ignorance of historical understanding of the particular; and universalism and internationalism without respect for the local and the national. Without entering into the complications arising from the *differences* between the various deriders of the Enlightenment,¹⁰ it should be obvious that it is pointless to shackle the philosophy of the century to a concept that to such a degree has been shaped and reshaped by the culture wars of later periods.

A much more serious issue is the second factor mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, namely, the attempt to identify the philosophy of the eighteenth century as the gradual culmination of a distinctively early-modern philosophy. This general idea has commonly been relied upon by such critics of the Enlightenment as those cited earlier, but it has been shared by most people who would not see themselves in this light. It has, in fact, been the backbone of most general histories of philosophy in the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation period, and it is certain that it, in one way or another, has an influence on both authors and readers of the present volume. It is the paradigm within which we work, or, at least, from which we set out, even when we want to be critical of it, and, as will be evident from several aspects of this work, much scholarship has been devoted to such criticism. As is so often the case with general paradigms of old vintage, this one is vague and endlessly flexible, and any brief delineation of it is correspondingly difficult. However, it is possible to indicate the historicity of the standard concept of eighteenth-century philosophy and thus to alert the reader not to take the subject of this work for granted.

II. THE CONCEPT OF EARLY-MODERN PHILOSOPHY

The most basic of the ideas that have dominated the writing¹¹ of the history of philosophy during the last two centuries is that the theory of knowledge is at the core of all sound philosophy, the true *prima philosophia*. Furthermore, the significance of early-modern philosophy is commonly considered in this historiography to be that the roughly three centuries from the late Renaissance to 1800 were the period when philosophers increasingly came to understand this true nature of philosophy. The problem of knowledge which philosophy was supposed to deal with was that posed by scepticism conceived as a denial of the possibility of justified beliefs or scientific explanations. The philosophical history of the period has therefore commonly been told as the story of an ever-deepening struggle with scepticism that culminated in a total rejection of

the premises upon which the contest had taken place, or, rather, in two such rejections, that by Immanuel Kant and that by Thomas Reid.

For these two thinkers, the central question of philosophy was not how we could acquire true knowledge. Rather, given that we do have knowledge (especially science), how is this possible, or what are its presuppositions? This standpoint inspired subsequent generations to a view of the trajectory of early-modern philosophy according to which traditional ontology was largely an encumbrance on epistemology, and the development from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century consisted in shedding this burden. It was the Hegelian transition from substance to subject, from the so-called 'great systems' within which Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz had fought scepticism, to the theories of perception, ideas, and judgement with which Locke, Leibniz (again), Wolff, Berkeley, Condillac, Hume, and many others tried to found the new sciences. In other words, it was a development that confirmed and underlined one of the most elementary assumptions of the historians who traced it, namely, that knowledge is to be understood in terms of the individual person's mind, an assumption that remained remarkably unshaken despite Hegel.

Integral to the view indicated here is that the epistemological approach divided post-Renaissance philosophy into two major schools or directions, namely, rationalism and empiricism. The former has commonly been seen as characteristic of the European continent, though one of the defining features of eighteenth-century philosophy, on this view, was that France gradually switched from Cartesian rationalism to Lockean empiricism, embodied by Condillac. Germany, however, was supposed to maintain a continuous development of rational system-building through Leibniz, Wolff, and their followers and opponents. In contrast, the English-speaking world was seen to pursue the empiricist view in ever-finer detail from Bacon and Hobbes through Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

This way of understanding the core of early-modern philosophy is what I call the epistemological paradigm. It sees philosophy as essentially concerned with the justification of beliefs and judgements; it understands such justification in terms of events, whether perceptive or inferential, in the mind – or, as if in the mind – of the individual person; and it tends to apply this idea of epistemological justification as the criterion for what is properly included within the discipline of philosophy.

This basic model is familiar to everyone who has looked into the general histories of early-modern philosophy, both current and past, and to any teacher of the subject. Needless to say, there are a great many variations on this interpretative theme, often with acknowledgement of important exceptions and additions, such as the presence of an empiricist strain in German Enlightenment

thought, but the general features have been remarkably pervasive. Furthermore, the paradigm has reigned for a long time. The emphasis on the struggle against scepticism was already a prominent feature of the philosophical historiography of the Kantians at the close of the eighteenth century, and it has inspired some of the most appreciated contemporary scholarship in the form given to the thesis by Richard Popkin. Similarly, the pre-eminence given to epistemology is comparable in the Kantian Wilhelm Gottfried Tennemann's twelve-volume *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1798–1819) and Father Frederick Copleston's nine-volume *A History of Philosophy* (1946–74). It is also noticeable that while morals, politics, law, and art have gained status as objects of past philosophical inquiry in some recent general histories of philosophy, they are more often treated in the same stepmotherly manner as they were in the great nineteenth-century works, such as those by Friedrich Ueberweg and Kuno Fisher. Often they have been treated as separate disciplines with their own histories, obviously so in the case of the many histories of political thought, but also in major histories of ethics from, for instance, Christian Garve's *Uebersicht der vornehmsten Principien der Sittenlehre, von dem Zeitalter des Aristoteles an bis auf die unsre Zeiten* (1798), through Sir James Mackintosh's *Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy, Chiefly during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1830) and Friedrich Jodl's *Geschichte der Ethik in der neueren Philosophie* (1882–9), to J. B. Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (1998).

III. THE HISTORY OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM

The epistemological paradigm for the history of early-modern philosophy has held sway so universally, at least until recently, that it may be surprising to suggest that it itself has a history; in fact, that it can be traced back to a particular episode or couple of episodes at the close of the eighteenth century. The paradigm became so widely accepted because it was propagated by two remarkably successful philosophical movements in which a useful past was an integral part, namely, as mentioned, the Scottish Common Sense philosophy formulated by Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart and the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. As far as the latter is concerned, the way had been cleared in one fundamental respect by Jacob Brucker's and the Wolffians' downgrading of practical philosophy relative to theoretical philosophy, as Tim Hochstrasser has shown.¹² However, it was the Kantians who had the decisive influence on the writing of the histories.¹³

The pattern of philosophical history laid down by Reid, Kant, and their followers became prescriptive far beyond their own heyday. One reason for this continuing impact seems to have been that the history of philosophy became the subject of more or less basic university courses on the European continent

during the early and middle parts of the nineteenth century. It was during this period that it became widely accepted that the best introduction to the discipline of philosophy was through its history, and the textbooks for these courses were written under the influence of the views indicated here. Thus was created a teaching and textbook tradition that, as Ulrich Johannes Schneider has shown in great detail, swept through German- and French-dominated Europe.¹⁴ It also crossed the Channel, for although the English and Scottish universities were much slower to adopt systematic tuition in the history of philosophy, there was clearly an interest in the subject sufficient to sustain public lecture series, such as the early ones by Coleridge and Hazlitt, as well as general texts, both domestic products such as Dugald Stewart's *Dissertation Exhibiting the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy since the Revival of Letters in Europe* (1815–21), George Henry Lewes's *A Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845), Frederick Denison Maurice's several histories, and a large number of more specialised or limited histories, and imported works, such as William Enfield's version of Brucker, and translations of Tennemann, Hegel, Erdmann, Ueberweg, Windelband, Lefevre, Alfred Weber, Cousin, Høffding, and many more. However, it is clear that the acceptance of the subject was much slower in England than on the Continent. The English long considered the history of philosophy a recent German invention, in a sense quite rightly. It may be a sign of the time it took for the epistemological paradigm to conquer Britain that Enfield's (that is, Brucker's) distinctly pre-Kantian history (Brucker first published in 1742–4) remained acceptable so late in Britain: the fifth and last edition appeared in 1839.¹⁵

The epistemological paradigm has had a remarkable ability to transcend most major shifts in philosophy for nearly a couple of centuries. To take just one obvious example, often there was virtually no difference in views between the neo-Kantians and the logical positivists when it came to the general shape of the history of early-modern philosophy. Indeed, when a philosopher switched from the Kantian to the positivist camp, his idea of historical development might well remain unchanged (even though his *appraisals* changed). Similarly, the paradigm has been able to straddle the major confessional divides. There is not a whole lot of difference between, say, Karl Vorländer, Father Copleston, Bertrand Russell, and Anders Wedberg when it comes to deciding what is the mainstream of philosophy from Descartes to Kant.¹⁶

The philosophical differences between the two founders of the modern concept of the history of philosophy, Reid and Kant, were, of course, profound, but there was a striking similarity in their reactions to the immediate philosophical past. They both considered that David Hume had brought the modern philosophical tradition to a sceptical crisis because he reduced knowledge to

perceptually derived ideas whose representational warrant was impossible to establish. And they both rejected this notion of knowledge as ideas in favour of a concept of knowledge as judgements that are warranted by features of undeniability on the part of any individual who wants to claim any beliefs at all. At the same time, although there is a gulf between Reid's establishment of the first principles of common sense and Kant's transcendental deduction of the pure forms of sensible intuition and of the categories, they both retained a fundamental feature of what they took to be Hume's approach, namely, that knowledge is a matter of the activity of the individual mind. Both sides of this, the individualism and the mentalism, were to remain dominant assumptions in subsequent philosophy and, not least, in interpretations of the history of early-modern philosophy.

Kant's and Reid's views of how modern philosophy had reached what they considered the impasse of Hume's scepticism were not the same but they were compatible. Neither thinker wrote a history of philosophy, yet both developed their views in often intense dialogue with their predecessors. However, their discussions were generally conducted as if with contemporaries. Both of them were distinct 'presentists' for whom the philosophy of the past had to be overcome by making it a moment in their own thought. In Kant's case, this meant that we should deal with the history of philosophy not as 'historical and empirical' but as 'rational, i.e., possible a priori' – a 'philosophical archaeology' of 'the nature of human reason'. (Loses Blatt F 3, in Ak 20: 341). When Kant does approach the history of philosophy as 'historical and empirical' in his *Lectures on Logic*, his surveys are not dramatically different from those of his contemporaries, and his own promise of progress, namely the critical establishment of metaphysics as 'the real, true philosophy', itself seems to be within empirical history.¹⁷ However, when we turn to the treatment of the same history in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, we find the critical overcoming of dogmatism and scepticism and the stalemate, 'indifferentism', to which they have fought each other, to be inherent in reason itself. 'The critical path alone is still open.'¹⁸ Of course, it was this well-known idea of an unavoidable dialectical opposition between Leibniz's and Wolff's rationalism and dogmatism on one hand and Locke's empiricism tending to Hume's scepticism on the other that became the prototype of the canonical philosophical histories we have mentioned.

The foundational history in this vein was the already mentioned twelve-volume work by Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann.¹⁹ Springing from Tennemann's own lectures in Marburg, the work was of central importance to the three significant lecture series on the history of philosophy – mentioned earlier – that signalled the changing status of the subject at the opening of the nineteenth century, namely Hegel's in Berlin in the 1820s (and perhaps already in Jena in 1805), Cousin's in Paris in 1815, and Coleridge's in London in 1818.²⁰ Of

these, Hegel's were undoubtedly the most significant; they were an important step in Hegel's philosophical development and they helped establish the central role of the history of philosophy in the philosophical curriculum.²¹ However, although they were certainly more catholic in their conception of philosophy than many of the Kantian histories, one cannot say that Hegel substantially changed the contours of early-modern philosophy and its priorities, which had been laid down by the Kantian revolution. Something similar may be said about Schelling's lectures 'On the History of Modern Philosophy', probably from 1833–4 (but with much earlier predecessors, now lost). Despite their title, the lectures are devoted to the development of German idealism and its ancestry in Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Wolff, but they do devote a couple of pages to Bacon and Hume, mainly so as to invoke the formula that 'From the beginning of modern philosophy . . . , rationalism and empiricism move parallel to each other, and they have remained parallel until now.'²²

True to his ardent empiricism, Reid made the history of philosophy a moment in his own philosophy by thinking of it as, in Kant's words, 'historical and empirical', and, more particularly, as something that could be discarded in the discussion of mental philosophy once this had rid itself of silly metaphysical squabbles as natural philosophy had done. But until that day, Reid was sure that he had to 'build with one hand, and hold a weapon with the other.'²³ Reid's warfare was predominantly against the emergence of scepticism in modern thought.²⁴ From René Descartes via Nicholas Malebranche, John Locke, and George Berkeley to Reid's own time, philosophical views of how the human mind acquires knowledge of the world that enables people to conduct the business of life had become, as Reid saw it, more and more at variance with common understanding.

Reid thought that philosophers had been misled by the triumph of natural sciences into drawing an analogy between matter and mind and thus to using the methods of these sciences to explain both the cognitive and the active faculties of the mind. The very language that was being used in talking of mental phenomena was 'physicalistic', as we might say. The mental world was thus said to be composed of elements called ideas, and the composition was explained in spatial and mechanistic terms. Although few philosophers were materialists in the strict sense, most tended to understand the connection among ideas, passions, the will, and behaviour in causal or quasi-causal terms. When driven to its final, absurd conclusions, which Reid found in the work of David Hume, modern philosophy had created a phantom world of so-called ideas that sprang from objects of observation; the self was a conglomeration of perceived ideas; and the will as the source of action was nothing but the balance of passionate impulses at any given moment.