

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

JAMES HANKINS

Introduction

Readers who come to David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) equipped only with the taxonomies provided by modern histories of philosophy – “British empiricism” versus “continental rationalism,” scientific versus scholastic, ancients versus moderns – are likely to be taken aback at the way Hume in his first chapter, “Of the Different Species of Philosophy,” anatomizes the philosophy of his time. He distinguishes first a moral philosophy that “considers man chiefly as born for action,” which regards virtue as the most valuable of objects and “paint[s] her in the most amiable colours, borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence,” treating the subject “in an easy and obvious manner.” Moral philosophers of this kind “make us *feel* the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments; and so they can but bend our hearts to the love of probity and true honour, they think, that they have fully attained the end of all their labours.” But there is a second species of philosophers who “consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being, and endeavor to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners.” This kind of philosopher does not address the generality of men but “aim[s] at the approbation of the learned and the wise,” seeks “hidden truths” rather than an improvement in the behavior of mankind. Hume claims the first species of philosophy, being “easy and obvious,” will always be preferred to the “accurate and abstruse,” as is shown by the relative popularity of the first: “the fame of CICERO flourishes at present; but that of ARISTOTLE is utterly decayed. LA BRUYERE passes the seas, and still maintains his reputation: But the glory of MALEBRANCHE is confined to his own nation, and to his own age. And ADDISON, perhaps, will be read with pleasure, when LOCKE shall be entirely forgotten.”

Hume goes on to make a second distinction, dividing the “accurate and abstruse” philosophy (now called “metaphysics”) into two subspecies, a “false and adulterate metaphysics,” and a “true metaphysics.” The first is “not properly a science, but arise[s] either from the fruitless efforts of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES HANKINS

human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which being unable to defend themselves on fair ground raise these entangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness.” However, Hume thinks it possible to develop a “true metaphysics” characterized by “accurate and just reasoning” which will act as a remedy against “that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which being mixed up with popular superstition renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom.” This new philosophy, Hume hopes, will share some of the characteristics of popular moral philosophy by being clearly written and worthy of the attention of the public. And at the end of the *Enquiry* (Section XII) we are told that Hume’s new philosophy is actually Academic skepticism, an ancient philosophy “which may be of advantage to mankind” by counteracting the natural dogmatism of humanity without falling into the extremes of Pyrrhonian skepticism. It is a “mitigated skepticism” that preaches “modesty and reserve” in reaching conclusions appropriate to human reason.

Hume’s anatomy of philosophy, however strange to contemporary students of early modern thought, will be immediately recognizable to those familiar with the philosophy of the Renaissance. In the Renaissance too one may discern three main species of philosopher, broadly similar to Hume’s types. There was the humanist moral philosopher, addressing a general audience in an accessible manner, aiming to effect an increase in public and private virtue. Then there were the professors of philosophy in the universities, who treated abstruse subjects in technical language, addressing professional philosophers and offering solutions to logical, physical and metaphysical problems of interest to their community. These were figures often ridiculed by critics in language similar to Hume’s. Finally there were “new” philosophers who claimed to be reforming philosophy, purging it of dogmatism, impiety or superstition, usually by reviving some neglected philosophical school of antiquity.

The similarity between the landscape of Renaissance philosophy and Hume’s taxonomy suggests a certain continuity between the thought of the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, often labeled late medieval or Renaissance or premodern or transitional, and that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, generally regarded as modern or early modern. Further continuities could be enumerated. These might include the ongoing exploration and revival of the ancient philosophical schools in those five hundred years; the centrality of Aristotle to philosophical curricula, accompanied always by criticism of his educational role and attempts to reform and modernize the Aristotelian tradition from within; the rivalry between metaphysical optimism and voluntarism going back to Avicenna and Ockham

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

but renewed in the seventeenth century by Gassendi and Leibniz; the ongoing debate about the autonomy of philosophy and its proper relationship to theology and religious belief. Such is the nature, number and importance of the continuities that it is understandable that some scholars in recent years have questioned the appropriateness of a periodization that begins modern philosophy with Bacon and Descartes. Many themes in the writings of seventeenth-century philosophy, it has been observed, come from traditional sources.¹ To be sure, there is much that is new in seventeenth-century philosophy. The victory of Copernican cosmology, the success of mechanical philosophy and the rejection of ancient authority by some influential philosophers are unquestionably major watersheds in the history of thought. But revolutions in the mental world of Europeans are not lacking in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries either. To these centuries belong, after all, the invention of printing, the discovery of a new hemisphere by Europeans, the religious revolutions of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, and the rise of absolutism and a centralizing state. It would be difficult to argue that the latter series of events had any less impact on philosophical reflection than the former. The view that modern philosophy begins in the seventeenth century clearly has much more to do with the “conversational partners” preferred by modern philosophers, about which more will be said in the conclusion of this volume. Here it will merely be observed that, from the point of view of intellectual history, any project to understand the genealogy and nature of modernity cannot fail to give Renaissance philosophy a central place.

This is hardly a new idea, and indeed tracing the origins of modern philosophy back to the Renaissance was the project of Ernst Cassirer’s *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (1927), arguably the most influential study of Renaissance philosophy in the twentieth century.² Cassirer, a neo-Kantian, traced modern philosophy – for him identical with the philosophy of Kant – back to Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) on the grounds that it was Cusanus who first foregrounded the problem of knowledge and who understood the proper role of mathematics in analyzing nature. Cassirer discussed a variety of other figures such as Francesco Petrarca, Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Pomponazzi, and Galileo and tried to make some generalizations about trends in Renaissance ideas about freedom and necessity and the subject–object problem. But Cassirer was working with relatively few data points and a number of anachronistic categories, and there is little in his analysis that would satisfy specialists today. Recent scholarship has focused instead on the three broad traditions of philosophical writing alluded to above: humanism, scholasticism and the “new philosophies.”

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES HANKINS

Humanism, originally a movement in north Italian city-states to revive Roman literature, was refashioned by Francesco Petrarca into a distinct form of culture, challenging the hegemony of scholasticism, which he regarded as dogmatic, excessively technical, useless, impious, and (worst of all) French. Petrarch proposed instead that the study of ancient Roman literature would lead to the moral renewal of Italian society and the return of Roman greatness. Humanists would address all educated persons and would spread virtue, eloquence and love of country. Humane studies would embrace all ancient philosophers, not just Aristotle. As humanism became an established educational tradition in the fifteenth century, Petrarca's vision was gradually realized. Humanists searched for, edited and translated the works of neglected and unknown ancient philosophers, including Platonists, Epicureans, and Stoics, and even encouraged the study of non-Christian religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism as well as the "ancient theologies" of Hermeticism, Orphism, and Zoroastrianism.³ They proposed humanistic reforms of other educational traditions, so that one can speak of humanistic medicine, humanist logic, humanistic law, and humanistic theologies; even the Aristotelian philosophy of the schools was affected. The hallmarks of humanist reform were always accurate study of texts in the original languages, preference for ancient authors and commentators over medieval ones, and avoidance of technical language in the interests of moral suasion and accessibility.

The success of the humanists did not by any means signal decadence in the world of scholastic philosophy. In Italy, especially at the universities of Padua and Bologna, it might even be said that scholasticism was enjoying a second golden age. Italy developed its own tradition of university philosophy, sometimes misleadingly referred to as the "School of Padua" or "Averroism," which flourished between the time of Paul of Venice and Pietro Pomponazzi and for long afterwards. In addition to developing a range of distinctive and subtle positions in logic, metaphysics, natural philosophy and psychology, Italian scholastics responded to the challenge of humanism by seeking out more correct texts and translations and by reviving the study of the Greek commentators on Aristotle. But they did not usually share the sweeping prejudice of the humanists against the "medieval" or their hostility to technical language. Italian scholastics in fact continued or revived the study of their medieval predecessors, so that one can find lively Renaissance traditions of Albertism, Thomism, Scotism, and nominalism. The other great scholastic tradition of the Renaissance, that radiating from the Iberian and Hispanic worlds in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, also continued to find inspiration in medieval scholastic traditions, particularly Thomism. And it too developed its own distinctive metaphysical and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ethical positions, particularly in response to the Spanish conquests in the New World, which raised issues about the morality of empire, conquest and slavery. Hispanic scholastic philosophers ultimately helped found new forms of international law which emerged in the seventeenth century with the burgeoning of the European overseas empires.

Even though by any objective standards scholastic philosophy was still creative and responsive to new cultural influences during the Renaissance, many philosophers of the time found the categories, intellectual habits, and interests of school Aristotelianism too confining; some, indeed, denounced it as dry, morally empty, or pernicious to true piety. So the Renaissance saw a number of “new” philosophies – “new” in the sense of “non-Aristotelian” – which went beyond the eclectic moralism of the humanists and challenged the scholastics on their own ground. These philosophies constituted full-fledged alternatives to current Aristotelian philosophies, and usually sought inspiration in other ancient philosophical systems, principally Platonism. The first of the new philosophies (though “new theology” might be a more correct term) was elaborated by Nicholas of Cusa, who, though continuing the traditions of Dionysian and Proclan Platonism descending from the Rhenish students of Albert the Great, deserves the title of the first “new philosopher” of the Renaissance for reasons discussed by Dermot Moran in chapter 9.⁴ Other new philosophers include Ficino (who revived Neoplatonism), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (who based his new universal theology on Cabala and other esoteric philosophies), Francesco Giorgi, Agostino Steuco, Giambattista della Porta, Francesco Patrizi, Giordano Bruno, Tommaso Campanella, and Pierre Gassendi. All of these men drew on neglected ancient philosophies to propose comprehensive alternatives to Aristotelianism. In this group of philosophers – it would be too strong to call it a tradition – one finds an effort to propose new philosophies of language, new natural logics, new physical theories, new cosmologies, psychologies, and politics as well as new philosophical vocabularies. In this group one also finds the most incautious challengers of Christian orthodoxy. Of the ten figures just mentioned, the Inquisition investigated four, tortured and imprisoned another, and burned a fifth at the stake; the works of all but Cusanus and Steuco were on the *Index of Prohibited Books* at one time or another. Finally, it is this group of thinkers that most clearly reveals, above all through their interest in magic, the desire for power over nature that is characteristic of the Renaissance as a whole and a precondition for the emergence of applied science and technology in the early modern period.⁵

The fractiousness and pluralism of the philosophical enterprise in the Renaissance raised in acute form a question that concerns philosophers in all periods: just what is philosophy, and what should it be? Should it be

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES HANKINS

what it often was in antiquity, a cult-like group of disciples following the teachings of a master, seeking an esoteric, transformative view of reality distinct from that of the society around them, providing them with godlike tranquillity or a sense of moral worth? Or should it be merely a form of culture, part of the education of the orator–statesman, outfitting him with topics and arguments, as Cicero preferred? Or should it be what it became in the Middle Ages, a faculty in a university, preparatory to the study of theology, medicine, and law? Some philosophy masters rejected this humble role already in the Middle Ages, and were accused by the theologians of wanting to make philosophy the rival rather than the handmaid of theology. By the fourteenth century some scholastics evidently believed that philosophy should declare its independence from “higher” studies, even from religion, and become an autonomous branch of knowledge, offering a kind of happiness distinct from religious beatitude.⁶ Such claims naturally drew criticism, above all from humanists. Humanists wanted philosophers to give up their pretensions to a theoretical wisdom above the reach of human reason and confine themselves to the modest task of moral formation. But they in their turn were vociferously contradicted by the new philosophers, the Platonists and *Naturphilosophen*, who believed that philosophy should teach an esoteric wisdom or constitute a source of secrets about the natural world, an avenue to power over nature, even a way to escape the limits of our humanity and become gods. Others influenced by medieval Arabic thinkers saw philosophy as a master-science, embracing and giving principles to all the sciences; some, like Campanella or Bacon, saw it as a guide to the reform of politics; others, like the skeptics Montaigne, Pierre Charron, or Francisco Sanches, saw it as a form of psychic therapy. Marsilio Ficino and Giambattista della Porta identified the aims of the philosopher with those of the magician.

Given this diversity of outlook, it is no surprise that many subjects considered to belong to philosophy in the Renaissance would no longer be thought philosophical today: most of natural philosophy (which included botany, biology, medicine, physiology, optics, physics and cosmology), magic, demonology, music, astrology, mysticism, theosophy, and theology. Also within the purview of Renaissance philosophers were classical philology, history, literature, politics, poetry, rhetoric, the art of household management, and biblical hermeneutics as well as the sciences of angelology, numerology, and Cabala. Indeed, since in the Renaissance philosophy could still mean learning in general (as Robert Black points out in chapter 2), the list of subjects potentially to be included under philosophy could be extended indefinitely.

Clearly some compromise is called for between the requirements of the modern academy and strict historicism, so philosophy for the purposes of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the present collection will be understood approximately as it is understood today, as comprising, in other words, the philosophy of language, logic, metaphysics, psychology, religion, politics, and ethics. Even within this narrower field, the present volume does not aim to provide “coverage” of all major themes and figures, which is hardly possible in a volume this size, and hardly necessary given the existence of the *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, the *Routledge History of Philosophy* and the excellent textbook *Renaissance Philosophy* by Charles Schmitt and Brian Copenhaver, to say nothing of works in other languages. The goal here is rather to provide a guide to the most distinctive themes and important contributions of Renaissance philosophy, especially those that have been discussed in recent scholarly literature, and to sketch in the most important cultural developments that affected what philosophers wrote and how they wrote it. It is intended primarily to serve philosophers and intellectual historians as well as students of the Renaissance interested in the ways that the art, literature, music, religion, and politics of the period reflect and are reflected in its philosophical life.

The plan of this volume emphasizes the dynamism and pluralism of Renaissance philosophy, its search for new philosophical perspectives as well as its transformation and radicalization of scholastic traditions inherited from the Middle Ages. The volume falls roughly into two parts. The first part focuses on the various revivals of ancient philosophy as well as the transformation of Aristotelianism and the Arabic philosophical traditions inherited from the Middle Ages. Luca Bianchi describes the continuing dominance of Aristotle in university curricula, the response of scholastic philosophers to the new cultural priorities coming from humanism, and the continual process of adaptation, hybridization, and school formation within the broader Aristotelian tradition. Christopher Celenza tells the story of the Platonic revival as a process of cultural mediation and interpretation, and shows how Platonism created a new kind of philosophical culture with close links to religious devotion, medicine, and the literature of courts. Jill Kraye discusses the humanist revivals of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and skepticism; the new interest in the Hellenistic practice of psychic therapy; and the hermeneutical difficulties faced by scholars and thinkers trying to naturalize Hellenistic philosophy in a Christian culture. Though Arabic philosophy had been studied in Latin Christendom since the twelfth century, Dag Nikolaus Hasse shows that the apogee of Western interest in Arabic philosophy was reached only in the sixteenth century, and he gives some case studies of its influence on Renaissance psychology, natural philosophy, and the theory of religious inspiration. Finally, Brian Copenhaver discusses the question of whether Ficino’s revival of ancient magic can be seen as an agent of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES HANKINS

modernization, and shows how magic could provide a new way of reading the Platonic dialogues and a new way of understanding religion as an effect of wider magical and astrological processes.

The second part of the book looks forward towards modern philosophy and dwells on the original contributions of the period in the the philosophy of language, metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, ethics, and politics. The question of modernity is explicitly raised by Dermot Moran who takes a moderate position on the much-discussed issue of the modernity of Cusanus. Lodi Nauta treats the humanist reform of the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric), asking whether one can identify a specifically *philosophical* contribution of humanism in these areas; focusing on the limit case of Lorenzo Valla, he shows how Valla's emphasis on the linguistic basis of all intellectual activity leads to "a new hermeneutics, a new approach to texts, arguments and meaning." Paul Richard Blum gives an account of the major philosophical issue of the High Renaissance, namely the problem of human immortality; he explains the metaphysical, epistemological, and theological aspects of the issue and discusses the continuities between Renaissance and seventeenth-century approaches to the problem. John P. Doyle shows how the much-neglected tradition of Hispanic scholasticism engaged with contemporary moral issues raised by the Spanish conquest of the New World and was an integral part of European philosophical debate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The rising challenge to the Aristotelian worldview is the subject of Miguel Granada's chapter, which discusses the alternative cosmologies proposed by the four major natural philosophers of late Renaissance Italy: Bernardino Telesio, Francesco Patrizi, Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella. David Lines describes the rivalry and cross-fertilization between the humanist and scholastic traditions in the teaching of ethics, and gives a summary of the major issues in Renaissance moral thought. Finally, Eric Nelson shows how an under-theorized aspect of the medieval concept of rulership leads to an elaboration of republican theory and a new approach to the problem of political order, while the recovery of the Roman republican tradition complicated Greek ideas of liberty and justice inherited from Aristotle's *Politics*.

In addition to the chapters dealing directly with the work of Renaissance philosophers there are four chapters devoted to the historical setting and conditions of inquiry encountered by Renaissance philosophy. Robert Black describes the way philosophy was studied at different levels of the curricula and in different educational settings, including humanist schools, universities, academies, and courts. James Hankins gives an account of humanism and scholasticism as rival forms of education, each with its own intellectual practices and purposes, and discusses the aims and limitations of humanist

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

moral philosophy using Petrarca as a case study. Peter Harrison explains the impact of the sixteenth-century Reformation on philosophy and how it was taught, and shows how Protestantism provided a model for the seventeenth-century reforms of philosophy while promoting voluntarism, corpuscularism, experimentalism, and the demystification of nature; the Reformation promoted, he argues, a new conception of philosophy as a body of doctrines rather than as an avenue of self-transformation. Finally, Ann Blair describes how classifications of the disciplines and the ordering of knowledge and objects changed in response to the information revolution of the Renaissance – the invention of printing – while emphasizing the broad continuity of disciplinary schemes and techniques of information retrieval between the medieval period and the end of the seventeenth century.

NOTES

1. Sorell 1993, Parkinson 1993, Menn 1998b; Kraye and Stone 2000; French and Wetstein 2002.
2. English translation in Cassirer 1972.
3. For the recovery of ancient philosophical literature in the Renaissance, see Hankins and Palmer 2007.
4. De Libera 1984.
5. The classic study is Yates 1964; see also chapter 8 in this volume.
6. Bianchi 2003.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60893-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy

Edited by James Hankins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Continuity and revival