

***The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz.* Edited by Tom Sorell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 352 pp.**

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Scholars and teachers are often hard-pressed to look beyond the confines of the specific writings of the philosophers they are discussing in their courses. Ensnared in a set of curricular demands that inevitably compel them to move briskly through their history of philosophy syllabus, there is usually little, if any, opportunity to look around and consider the broader picture—the context in which the philosophers wrote. To some, this seems an unfortunate state of affairs. Karl Popper, for instance, argues that this, the *prima facie* method of teaching philosophy, as he sees it, is beset with problems:

A new world of astonishingly subtle and vast *abstractions* opens itself before the reader; abstractions on an extremely high and difficult level. Thoughts and arguments are put before his mind which sometimes are not only hard to understand, but which seem to him irrelevant because he cannot find out what they may be relevant to. (Popper 1972: 72)

Soon the student entertains the notion that these historical figures are producing irrelevant nonsense—an assessment likely to undercut, at least for these students, the widespread view that these past philosophers are great thinkers. To correct this malaise, and help restore balance to our enquiries philosophical, Popper proposes we work hard at placing the philosophers' problems in the context that generates the issues in the first place. And for Popper, this extra-philosophical setting that inspires philosophers to develop their ideas is comprised of the sciences:

Only if he understands the contemporary problem-situation in the sciences can the student of the great philosophers understand that they tried to solve urgent and concrete problems; problems which they found could not be dismissed. And only after understanding this can the student attain a different picture of the great philosophies—one which makes sense of the apparent nonsense. (Popper 1972: 73)

Rooted as philosophical problems are in the sciences, Popper asserts that attempts to understand these problems must include an investigation of the scientific context that gives rise to these issues. The collection of papers, *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, edited by Tom Sorell, is an admirable attempt to recapture the contexts, both philosophical and scientific, that gave life to the philosophical contributions

of the early modern thinkers. And while there is only one paper devoted exclusively to Leibniz—namely, Stuart Brown’s “Leibniz: Modern, Scholastic, or Renaissance Philosopher?”—the references to his thought throughout the anthology help establish the links between Leibniz and the other “modern philosophers.” So Leibnizian and non-Leibnizian scholars and teachers alike will welcome this volume of essays for this reason.

The fifteen contributions to this anthology are conveniently divided into three sections:

- two overview papers on scepticism and Aristotelianism
- nine contributions on the method allegedly developed by early modern thinkers, the metaphysical systems of the moderns’ views on music, and ideas on theology
- finally, four essays on the supposed “modernity” in the political and moral contributions of Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, and Machiavelli.

At first glance, these might strike one as disparate, if not entirely disjointed contributions, ill-suited for a single volume. To preempt this possible criticism, and to accentuate the interconnections that do exist between the different contributions, Sorell has provided the reader a lucid introduction that serves as an excellent roadmap to the analyses that follow.

Citing the work of Charles Schmitt, Sorell suggests that a widely held conception of the intellectual developments between 1550 and 1650 in Western Europe “is seriously misleading” (p.2).¹ Along with Schmitt, Sorell suggests that the received view of this period holds that a scientific revolution occurred in Western Europe—a revolution that marked the rapid demise of the old order:

During these hundred-odd years the researches of Copernicus, Kepler, Gilbert, Galileo, Harvey and others superseded an Aristotelian or scholastic science, so it is said, and a new or modern science was born. (p.1)

Further, this standard view of the period maintains that Bacon and Descartes are the preeminent contributors to the new science, with their carefully crafted methods for discovering knowledge: systematic methods that promised to yield an orderly set of truths, rather than a chaotic assemblage of insights into the universe:

...Bacon and Descartes are said to have triumphed by emphasizing the benefits of method. Both writers conceded that, unaided, the human faculties of reason and sense were unsatisfactory instruments of scientific discovery; but they insisted that the powers of these faculties could be enhanced, notably by the strict observance of certain rules of enquiry (p.2).

The Rise of Modern Philosophy is a sustained effort to show that this attempt at a

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neat depiction of the intellectual developments of the era generally labelled “early modern” is misguided. The argument for this conclusion appeals to the following central premise: the boundary between the old and the new orders is not nearly as well-defined as many have long thought. In fact, the case can be made that there are no boundaries to talk about, because is it not clear that there are two entirely different orders to begin with.

While each contribution in the collection lends support to this premise on the fragility of the boundary between the old and the new, some do so in a qualified manner. Stuart Brown, for instance, in his paper “Leibniz: Modern, Scholastic, or Renaissance Philosopher?” argues that the Leibniz of the late 1660s was deeply influenced by his “adherence to scholastic notions.” So much so, suggests Brown, that Leibniz at that time “could not bring himself to go as far as Locke and Newton in rejecting the project of making nature intelligible” (p. 216). Others also draw attention to the cautious integration of the old and the new in the thinkers we perhaps too simplistically classify as “modern.” Margaret Osler’s “Gassendi’s Epicurean Project” is a case in point. Ostensively on the influence of the early Greek atomists’ ideas on the “modern” Pierre Gassendi’s views, Osler reminds us of the need to treat the distinctions with care:

Gassendi’s Epicurean project, which effectively reintroduced Greek atomism into seventeenth-century natural philosophy and ethics, can be understood in terms of the ancient/modern distinction, but only if we understand that it partook of both modes... Far from simply imitating and venerating the ancient philosopher, however, Gassendi modified his views along theological lines. (p.143)

This suggestion that the moderns resorted to modifications “along theological lines,” that Osler argues for in her paper, is taken up by others as well. Much of the effort in this collection is devoted to showing how the moderns reconciled their ‘new’ views with their religious beliefs. As each of the contributions amply illustrates, while the influence of the ancients was admittedly pervasive, and did not dissipate easily, this influence was tempered by the power of the church. Hence David Duncan’s proposal, for example, that “Mersenne’s Catholicism acted as a brake on the momentum his critique of ancient authority had gathered”(p.105).

Given the constraints on this review, I shall say a little on the specifics of only one of the contributions to this volume. Richard Popkin’s “Scepticism and Modernity,” arguably the cornerstone of this anthology, sets out to establish a bold thesis on the origin of modern philosophy. As he sees it, the publication of the sceptic Sextus Empiricus’ views in Latin in 1562 brought about a sea-change in intellectual circles

in Western Europe. This

...revival of ancient scepticism and its application to the intellectual and religious problems of the time was crucial in the rise of modern philosophy. Its force and its undermining of the prevailing dogmatic philosophies led *to the attempts from Descartes onward to construct a new philosophy that could overcome or avoid the doubts of the sceptics* (p. 32, my emphasis).

While Popkin might be correct in singling out the appearance of a particular publication as a significant event in a world of letters not awash with printed material, his depiction of this specific event as of momentous import will likely be met with raised eyebrows, if not outright scepticism. His is surely too strong a general thesis on the origin of the new philosophy. To suggest that thinkers as disparate as Descartes, Hume and Kant, for instance, are all ultimately striving to confront the scepticism allegedly reintroduced by a specific text in 1562 will likely strike readers as too convenient an interpretation of what must surely have been a highly complex state of affairs. To be a little more specific, let us take a look at Popkin on Descartes.

As Popkin sees it, Descartes set out to confront the ‘sceptical atmosphere’ prevalent in Europe in the 1620s. “The *cogito*, the assurance of one’s own existence, became the central point for Descartes *in overturning scepticism*” (p.25, my emphasis). But to establish this assurance of his own existence, Descartes appears to rely on two vital premises, propositions that also happen to function as fundamental tenets of Pyrrhonic scepticism:

In the first place, Descartes shows that the confidence we have in the senses can be undermined. While there are occasions where the senses seem reliable—“up to the present time [what] I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses” (Kaufmann and Baird 1994: 25, my insert)—on reflection we realize that there are also other situations where we are misled by the senses, e.g., when we experience illusions. So our assessment of our sensory experiences can fluctuate.

In the second place, despite the deep depression that follows his critical enquiries in the *First Meditation*, Descartes decides to continue his search for a belief that is “certain and indubitable.” As he exclaims, “I shall nevertheless make an effort and follow anew the same path as that on which I yesterday entered...” (Kaufmann and Baird 1994: 28). Rather than dwell on the depressing outcome of the scrutiny of his belief-system, Descartes resolutely presses on, fully acknowledging that certainty could continue to prove elusive.

But are these not the very same commitments espoused by Sextus Empiricus?

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To begin with, this sceptic reminds us of the fallibility of our sensory beliefs:

...when we question whether the underlying object is such as it appears, we grant the fact that it appears, and *our doubt does not concern the appearance itself but the account given of the appearance...*(Kaufmann and Baird 1994: p.458, my emphasis)

Secondly, and more importantly, Sextus Empiricus exhorted us to persist in our search for the truth, even though our sensory beliefs can be undermined:

...some have claimed to have discovered the truth, others have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, while *others again go on inquiring*. Those who believe they have discovered it are the 'Dogmatists', ...other Academics treat it as inapprehensible, *the Sceptics keep on searching*. (Kaufmann and Baird 1994, pp.455-56, my emphasis)

The decision to continue his search for beliefs "certain and indubitable," the dismal results of the critical inquiry of the *First Meditation* notwithstanding, strongly suggests that Descartes subscribes to at least two of the essential components of the scepticism outlined by Sextus Empiricus. While these might not be the only essential components of Pyrrhonic scepticism, the evidence above constitutes at least *prima facie* grounds for the view Descartes is sympathetic to the sceptic's mission. And in that case, Popkin's thesis that Descartes has attempted to "overcome or avoid the doubts of the sceptics" appears misleading, if not false.

In his introduction Sorell suggests that many of the contributors to this anthology have placed themselves "in the curious no man's land between ancient and modern" (p.6). Given the widely held view in these essays that there was a sceptical crisis in the period between 1550 and 1650, readers of *The Rise of Modern Philosophy* will understandably also be curious about the precise location, and perhaps more importantly, the nature of the scepticism allegedly lurking in this no man's land.

¹While others are mentioned, Schmitt's ideas are clearly the primary inspiration for this volume. Sorell refers specifically to Schmitt's *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), and "Towards a Reassessment of Renaissance Aristotelianism" *History of Science* 11 (1973), pp. 159-93.

References

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Sextus Empiricus, "Outlines of Pyrrhonism," in *Ancient Philosophy*, edited by Walter Kaufmann and Forrest Baird (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1994).