

COSMOLOGY without HEADACHES

(Lecture Series)

(compiling, transcribing, researching, editing always in progress)

LECTURE XIX: Locke Civilizes Hobbes, Begets Representative Democracy, Points to Modern Social Science; Berkeley & Hume Attempt to End Knowledge

The mechanistic cosmos, while far from generally accepted, was certainly in vogue among modern thinkers. It was also in dispute as to how it was constituted and how it worked: What was its nature? With the ideas of Hobbes now in the air: suggesting that civil society is rationally constructed (artificial), and that it might as such be examined by science as part of the mathematical Universe, the idea began to spread that natural laws, such as were being discovered in ‘natural philosophy’ (the new physics, though that term was still being used to describe medicine), might also govern psychological and political things. Moving on down the strictly materialist road toward knowledge, then, seemed to some mechanists to be simply a matter of momentum.

Acceleration in that direction was provided by

John Locke [1632-1704].



As a teen at Westminster School he must have been affected deeply by the execution of Charles I (1649) at the nearby Whitehall Palace Yard. Though the boys were not likely to have been allowed to witness it, a regicide is an event of world shaking impact—after which the notion of ruling by divine right should have been pretty much expunged. Yet that was still the political view of Sir Robert Filmer, who published in 1680 his *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings Asserted*, against which Locke would write his first *Treatise on Government*. Filmer had actually written *Patriarcha* in 1642, in support of Charles I, but publishing was delayed and the work was withheld after the King’s beheading, and soon Filmer was imprisoned. He died in 1652, but his work was posthumously revived during Charles II’s absolutist reign (after Oliver Cromwell had died and his son Richard had abdicated; or perhaps we should say ‘yielded’ his difficult to define political leadership position). When Locke’s patron, First Earl of Shaftsbury, lost favor with the reinstated crown, Locke went traveling in France, where he was introduced to the Continental moderns and the philosophy of Pierre Gassendi, the atomist and guru of the new science. Gassendi also had argued against what are called ‘innate ideas’: the attempt to explain things like instinct, intuition, or logic as born-in knowledge. Plato thought such knowledge as could not have been gained by present experience was remembered, unwittingly, by the soul from past lives. [But how did the younger version of the soul manage to learn such knowledge then?—an example of infinite regression.] Gassendi instead compared the infant mind to a *tabula rasa* (clean slate), and had pronounced *Nihil est in intellectu nisi quod prius fuerit in sensu* [‘There is nothing in the mind except what was first in the senses’]. This was to strike a chord with many who had been swayed by the mechanistic universe concept.

Returning to England Locke found Shaftsbury increasingly involved in what would be an abortive revolution (1685) led by the Duke of Monmouth. Before that attempt could be undertaken, Shaftsbury was arrested. But he escaped his captors and fled to Holland. Locke found himself under suspicion and, before James II ascended to the throne, he too sought refuge in Holland, where he wrote most of his work and joined the plot to replace James II with the King's own son-in-law, William III of Orange.

Filmer's premise in *Patriarcha* was the anti-Hobbes idea that natural freedom is a romantic myth. Pre-civil humans are, from time immemorial, *not* free, but are born to controlling parents and live mostly under patriarchal absolutism all their lives. It is patriarchy, then, that *naturally* establishes government and traces its roots right to Adam. Thus, he argued, the divine right of kings is established Biblically—i.e., God controls it continually by bloodlines through the womb. If we were to be warped into the belief that government is based on consent of the governed, he feared that every slighted faction would claim the right to rebel, and there would eventually be no government. We would descend into anarchy: rule of the mob, and (Locke quotes him as saying) “there is no tyranny to be compared to the tyranny of the multitude” [Filmer, *Patriarcha*, per Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 255f; as quoted in Durants, *AGE OF LOUIS XIV*, p.580]. So, in agreement with Hobbes at least in this, Filmer thought any government, however harsh, is better than no government, but only that of the divinely appointed monarch is legitimate.

As a proponent of the Glorious Revolution, Locke thought it necessary to refute Filmer's arguments—not because they were especially well fashioned, he commented, but because they had been so widely read and had thus gained undue influence. The first of his *Two Treatises* is mainly the anti-Filmer argument. Locke first argued that all men are born free, and thus legitimate government arises only by consent. The idea of divine right is discredited, and government by sheer conquest is illegitimate and can be continued only by perpetual force, thus destroying or abrogating natural rights rather than protecting them—at least until the conquered people somehow provide their approval of the conqueror. Natural freedom, Locke claimed, is based on natural equality: everyone in the state of nature having an equal right to everything he needed. Yet he tried to refute Hobbes' presumption that the state of nature is a state of war. Locke thought it is simply a condition of “men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them” [Robert A. Goldwin essay: *John Locke in Strauss-Cropsey*, *HISTORY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY*, 3^d ed.; Univ. of Chicago, 1987 (p.478)].

A state of war, Locke proposed, requires an act of force without right or justice. He agreed with Hobbes that the passions are fundamental and necessary in preserving humanity, and he went further, considering that nature has an interest [via God?] in the increase of all species. Among the ancients the passions were generally considered evil, tending to enslave men, thereby needing to be overcome, denied, subdued and ruled by reason. Locke saw the passions as a tool and believed they ought to be utilized, not blocked. Reason should guide humans to the ‘best’ way of fulfilling the greatest passion: self-preservation, from which all other passions and desires are derived.

Notice this introduction of an ‘ought’ into the state of nature. Where, in a mechanistic universe, does that element of morality come from? We will not find an answer to that in Locke. He does admit that fear is the basis of the natural right to self-preservation, and men might well fear each other in the pre-civil natural state, even kill each other due to poor judgment in the use of their reasoning powers, but he does not

believe an ever-present state of war is the result. So civil society for Locke is not based on fear of violent death. Men, it seemed, were getting along alright in many of the primitive, pre-civil societies of the new world, and he believed that would continue to be the rule—as long as there is a condition of abundance. A state of poverty, however, would seem to induce increasing violence as the need of self-preservation induces theft and a struggle for survival. Yet, how can there be theft if there is no ownership? Isn't everything is in common in the state of nature? If, however, there is too little available there will be deadly competition. But Locke says there is a natural degree of ownership: each individual owns himself, at least, and therefore owns his labor. What his labor produces also becomes his, and all other notions of property are derivative from this.

To avoid a struggle over the hoarding of goods, then, there must be abundance, so that there is left in common a sufficiency for satisfying the needs of all others. If there is not abundance in nature, cultivation of the land through one's labor brings real estate into being and/or—in the case of perishable goods going to waste in the hands of a single, grasping owner—barter. Soon thereafter money enters the scene: something unanimously agreed as precious that can represent value in commodities—and all of this *before* the advent of civil society. This results in production of goods far beyond what sporadic nature could hope to produce, thus serving nature's intent—God's intent—to increase the species by a remarkable increase in production and supply. And all of this is happening still under the state of nature, justifying not only property in nature, but inequality of possession where the hard worker who produces plenty is a hero rather than a plunderer.

So we have economics before politics. Now comes a need for protection of private property, and this, says Locke, is the impetus for the social contract. "Government has no other end, but the preservation of property." Property is natural, but so is conquest and theft. So protection is the whole purpose of the state, and thus even "the supreme power cannot take from any man part of his property without his consent."

All well and good, and yet it could be argued that property owners—at least the most able of them—could protect themselves, with mercenaries if necessary: hired security forces, without having to resort to a civil government that might well become their much more powerful enemy—especially if that government was based on democratic consent and beholden to a less fortunate and envious majority. Well treated and sufficiently rewarded workers, in fact, might be willing, despite their subservience, to help protect an owner in the interest of keeping their jobs and protecting their families. In that case, we have an embryonic form of civil government based on economics, which is in turn based on self-preservation.

To me, it seems that these proprietors would find an interest in organizing into some sort of protective guild—even to share in the building of a common fortress. It would not be too far-fetched to claim that this—the economics of self-serving greed, not the democratic principle of consent—is the cause of the state. But it is not our purpose, here, to debunk Locke. We only need to be aware of his notion concerning the underpinning of civilization and how his thought, on top of Hobbes and soon to be followed by Rousseau, have shaped at least the political nature of our civilization. The new science and the mechanization of the cosmos, by separating itself from metaphysics, advanced the concept that the non-physical is non-knowable. The moral and social philosophers then attempted to rescue the 'things' that we know about yet cannot sense: things we 'experience' through reason. We ought to be able to examine scientifically these political

and psychological things, including society itself, even if only through mathematics,. Due in no small part to the modern view that has been gradually developing since Nicholas of Cusa; Roger Bacon; Copernicus through Kepler and Galileo; Francis Bacon; Pierre Gassendi; Descartes; Newton and the British Royal Society, the whole world was coming to be understood in a materialist way and thus subjected to scientific analysis. Here, with the concept of government by consent, we have begun to recognize society as made up of individuals, once like free-floating atomic particles or unconstrained celestial bodies that have gathered into a whole: a system—in this case a political object with a nucleus or sun that, gravity-like, corrals the interacting elements. The tendency is natural, but the whole is never perfectly formed because each individual has personal momentum as he moves through political space. The society comes to be perceived as swayed by the greatest number: movement toward a center of density created by the majority. But we ought to ask: Is the majority always (or ever) the greatest socio-political force? If all the planets (and all our asteroids and comets as well), were to line up on one side of the Sun, so as to pull together from the same direction, the Sun (not that it would be unaffected) would still out pull them easily and keep them all contained—besides, they would not remain aligned for long. A political majority in civil society may actually have greater total size or overall mass, but the sovereign or political ‘sun’ they create (or are subjected to through some sort of herd mentality) has much greater density and we must all be somehow dragged along by the system: the center of force. Here we have a materialistic model that might reveal some secret truths if carefully manipulated. Or it could lead to dangerous even disastrous results if misapplied. Physics laid the groundwork for improved technology and greater production through invention and engineering, thus promising a better life for Europeans and eventually for other parts of the world. So it seems the advent of the political and social and psychological sciences, based as they were on mechanical principles, meant dreams of social engineering were inevitable.

To actually do social engineering, just as in structural and mechanical engineering, the engineer must understand the constituents. He must know the attributes, the weight or density, the resistance factors, the tensile and compressive strengths, etc., of all the components if he is to combine them and manipulate them successfully to attain his end. So the design is limited; the artist is restricted—not necessarily by his lack of imagination, but by the nature of his materials and medium—not to mention funding. Can something be done about that? Just as with concrete, according to the materialist interpretation, by carefully and knowingly refining the constituents and adjusting the recipe and by introducing additives to the mix, the character of the product can be altered; so the behavior of a society might be changed and actually directed by controlling the content of knowledge, the learning environment, and the manner of instruction in the development of its individuals. Doesn't everyone want the best society?—the ‘good?’ The social engineer either assumes he knows what is best (if he is himself a social scientist), or he is given that knowledge from someone who presumably does know it (or who has significant control over the engineer's livelihood by such means as funding his research). In any case, a desired end must be proposed before designing can begin—something more specific in its details than ‘peace’ or ‘stability’—even if it might not be the absolute best (since the actual best can never be known), the social engineer sincerely believes his result will easily be better than that of natural serendipity (but better in what way and for whom?).

The idea of social engineering, in the ‘sciencistic’ manner outlined above, had not yet occurred at the time of Locke. In fact, Locke seems to have believed that a proper education will make individuals not only stronger and healthier but more empowered and thus *more* free rather than making them ideally subservient to an imposed social design. It seems education, for those worthy of it, was beginning to break free of indoctrination (except of course theologically) in favor of reason. Preparing humans to reason, it was surmised, would likely result in a better society. Of course, at that time not all humans were thought capable of such learning or worthy of such lessons. Still, Locke’s ideas via his essay, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* [1693], have had an enduring effect.

A sound mind, he proposed, rests in a sound body, so students should eat simply; wear thin clothing; sleep in hard beds; be exposed to harsh weather, fresh air, and exercise; and not be treated with medicines but, within limits, be left to recover their health naturally. Character and mentality should be strengthened by learning to keep desires in check, and right behavior formed by habit, for “habits work more constantly and with greater facility than reason, which, when we have most need of it, is seldom fairly consulted, and more rarely obeyed”. Though Locke was generally humane, he allowed that some of these habits might need reinforcement. Besides, “inuring children gently to suffer some degree of pain without shrinking is a way to gain firmness for their minds, and lay a foundation for courage and resolution in the future part of their lives”. He was talking about male pupils, of course: sons of gentlemen, generally land owners. They would grow to be men who would not have to work for a living. Locke believed

...the business of education is not to make the young perfect in any one of the sciences, but so to open and dispose their minds as may best make them capable of any, when they shall apply themselves to it. Nothing does this better than mathematics, which therefore, I think, would be taught to all those who have the time and opportunity, not so much to make them mathematicians as to make them reasonable creatures...We are born to be, if we please, reasonable creatures, but it is use and exercise that makes us so, and we are indeed so no further than industry and application has carried us...I have mentioned mathematics as a way to settle in the mind a habit of reasoning closely and in train...; that, having got the way of reasoning which that study naturally brings the mind to, they might be able to transfer it to other parts of knowledge as they shall have occasion.

Quotes from Locke found in Will & Ariel Durant (see below): THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV, as taken from PAUL MONROE, TEXTBOOK IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION (pp.514-19) & R.J. Arron, JOHN LOCKE, (pp.290-95)

The lessons would also include dancing, riding, wrestling, fencing, perhaps an introduction to a manual trade (only for understanding, not for proficiency), and art as recreation. The gentleman should take pleasure in poetry, but not write it except perhaps for personal amusement. Music, too, should be fully enjoyed, but (per Plato, in *Republic*) one should not allow his boys to become virtuosi. First, this would require too much of their time, and second, it would put them into “such odd company.” Locke sought to prepare the well-born for governing the less fortunate and, along with his political philosophy, these teachings had immense influence both in England and in America.

[Information above, having to do with Locke’s ideas on education, found in Durants: THE STORY OF CIVILIZATION, vol.VIII: THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV, ch.XVII; Simon & Schuster, NY, 1963 (pp.488-9)]

The point of having this discussion of education (other than noting the aspect of social engineering as previously mentioned) is that modern scientific ideas were able to spread relatively quickly and to be refined by increasingly high quality discussions among folks who, only a generation before, would have been incapable of accepting such heresies and might have been more likely to hang the messengers. The recent (in Locke's era) revelation of global geography and discovery of the surprising variety of societies and religions around the world tended to promote thoughts of toleration—except, of course, among the reactionaries, the ignorant, and the illiterate: the anti-moderns who saw the wave of heresies as a threat to traditions and a danger to the immortal soul and the masses who saw little but religious warfare, famine, and deadly diseases. Still, the rise of the written word in pamphlets, especially after the Thirty Years War, and the advent of newspapers (e.g., *London Gazette* was first published in 1665), pushed this modernism ever faster. The expansion of knowledge would surely have progressed at an even greater clip had there not been territorial disputes, particularly the Thirty Years War; the unending power struggles among intermarried European royalty; the ravages of the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution; and the foreboding persecutions of 'the other' faiths throughout Europe, even (or especially) in Holland between Catholics and Protestants, and particularly the horrible treatment of Jews practically everywhere on the Continent.

It seems just about everything was brought into question as traditions of all sorts lost their footing and their adherents began losing the debate to new views spawned by science. Then there was the human carnage due to the changing face of warfare, now being waged with ever more powerful cannon and more accurate muskets; the terrible waste of livestock and crops and humanity resulting from having armies, some of them completely mercenary and uncontrollable (especially when unpaid), constantly in the field brutally and mercilessly scouring out an existence and sating their lust at the expense of the peasantry when they weren't fighting other armies or sacking towns and robbing churches—particularly in eastern Europe and the German principalities—and all of this accompanied by a resurgence of plague. Imperial troops were no more disciplined than the forces raised by self-made soldiers like Ernst von Mansfeld who raised, kept, and rented his army to the highest bidder (or the likely winner), and Albrecht von Wallenstein who raised up to 125,000 men in the service of Archduke Ferdinand in return for enormous land grants and untold pillage, and Count Tilly who provided the mercenary army for the Catholic League and for Maximilian of Bavaria, and then there were the Spanish troops under Spinola, and from time to time Dutch troops, and the army of Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden.

A brief description of the conditions in the Germanies and eastern Europe during the Thirty Years War by a thorough and highly respected historian, C.V. Wedgwood:

Within Germany, Tilly's forces held the bishopric of Hildesheim, Wallensteins' were in Magdeburg and Halberstadt, in Brandenburg and parts of Bohemia. The Rhineland was occupied by Spanish and Bavarian troops; Austria, Bohemia, Hungary supported detachments of the imperial army. Mansfeld's mercenaries were in Silesia and Moravia, and Christian's soldiers on the western plain of the Elbe. Over the whole of western Germany the harvests had failed, and there was famine in Franconia and the Rhine valley. Plague had been very bad as Strasbourg, in Brandenburg round Stendal and Kottbus, in Silesia, at Sagan, at

Goldberg, in Nassau, in the Saar; in the province of Württemberg hunger and the pestilence had accounted for twenty-eight thousand. Disease could not be checked with the armies passing; typhus, scurvy, smallpox, syphilis, marched under the banners and bred in the countryside. Diseased horses and cattle trailed along among the baggage wagons, spreading contagion in the farms through which they passed.

Violence and insecurity were the accompaniment of life.... Savage reprisals followed the least attempt at resistance. At Weiss Kirchen in Moravia the people paid dearly for refusing shelter to Mansfeld's men for, as an English mercenary recorded, 'we entered killing man, woman and child: the execution continued the space of two hours, the pillaging two days'. [pp.216-217]

And again:

In ten years of war more than half the Empire had borne the actual occupation or passage of troops, the immediate disaster leaving a train of evils behind.... Plague took terrific toll of the hungry people and wiped out whole encampments of wretched refugees. Poverty and starvation robbed a naturally industrious people both of hope and of shame, so that it was no longer a disgrace to beg....

In Tyrol in 1628 they ground bean-stalks for bread, in Nassau in 1630 acorns and roots. Even in Bavaria starved bodies lay unburied on the roads. The harvest of 1627 on the banks of the Havel had promised well, but retreating Danes and pursuing imperialists destroyed it....

No matter what the destitution of the people, the soldiers continued their exactions and plied their nefarious sports.... At Kolberg alone they burnt five churches with all the barns and storehouses belonging to them, and this as often for the fun of the bonfire as for any other purpose; they would let off their pistols for sport into the haystacks, and once they deliberately set fire to a quarter of the town and came back when the houses were in ashes to plunder the people who were camping in the church with all that was left of their goods....

In Thuringia a party of Wallensteins' men, who had dined too well in one of those eating places in the cellars of the town-hall which seem as now to have provided the best food and drink in Germany, discovered that they could have fine sport firing at the feet of the passers-by through the low-set windows of the cellar.

In the Mark of Brandenburg, they carried off respectable burghers as hostages, dragged them for miles along the rough roads bound to their horses' tails and tied them like dogs under tables and benches for the night.... In his nightmare novel, *Grimmelshausen* [having experienced some of these atrocities] speaks of soldiers thrusting the peasants' thumbs into their pistols, thus improvizing a hideously effective thumbscrew; of the cord twisted round the head until the eyes began to start; of roasting and smoking over fires and in ovens; of pouring liquid filth into the mouths of the victims, which was later known as the Swedish drink. It was sport to shoot the prisoners tied in long rows one behind the other, and lay wagers on the number that one charge of shot would penetrate. [pp.255-257]

[Wedgwood: *THE THIRTY YEARS WAR*; Book of the Month Club edition, NY, 1995; *republished from* Random House, Ltd., UK, 1938]

And this was only in the tenth year of the war. It is not surprising that the advance of the new science was centered in England and France, which avoided the brunt of the war—England by its relative isolation; France owing much to international manipulations by that diplomatic genius, Cardinal Richelieu—though neither land was completely spared the loathsome aspect of these times. We get some idea of that, at least in England, from John Graunt, a haberdasher who, as a hobby, greatly advanced the emerging science of statistics as applied to humans by studying death records. In 1662 he published *Natural and Political Observations ... upon the Bills of Mortality*. He found that thirty-six percent of all children died before six years old; twenty-four percent died in the next ten years, fifteen percent in the next ten, etc. “Among the several casualties,” said Graunt,

some [particular causes of death] bear a constant proportion unto the whole number of burials; such are chronical diseases, and the diseases whereunto the city is most subject, as for example, consumptions, dropsies, jaundice, etc.

Here is the discovery that predictions of death rates are possible statistically—the basis for modern insurance actuarial tables. In the mechanistic world, individuals, once seen as the highest purpose of nature and God, are increasingly, scientifically, looked upon as merely parts of larger wholes: social molecules, as it were, and thus are about to be subjected to mathematics and quantification—becoming meaningless except as they are combined and recombined in endless groupings for a variety of accounting purposes.

Graunt also found that deaths exceeded births for many of the years of his study. In spite of that, apparently due to migration from the countryside, London continued to grow. A friend of Graunt, Wm. Petty, advocated a regular census so that birth and death records could be examined for all of England. Despite the reverse from time to time, he discovered that the general trend clearly favored the number of births over deaths, from which he deduced (in his *Political Arithmetic*, 1676; as Thomas Malthus would later surmise [1798]) that population tends to increase faster than the means of subsistence, which is the primary cause of war. War, of course, would seem to reduce population, but mostly by males, so the reduction in growth would be temporary, only to spurt again after the conflict was resolved and peace could be given a chance to enhance the rate of procreation. So Petty calculated that by the year 3682 the Earth would be severely overcrowded at an average density of more than two persons per acre. Perhaps he would have revised that estimate had he known of the death rates on the Continent.

[*Graunt data and quotes, above, are from A.Wolf: HISTORY OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES; New York, 1935; pp.590-610, as found and discussed in Will & Ariel Durant: THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV, ch.xviii, pp. 501-502]*

Perhaps, in view of internecine struggles over the form of Christianity, the most desperate question was ‘Where is God when humanity is in dire need of His help?’ The difficulty of finding an answer gave rise to increased atheism. Despite his materialism, Locke was not drawn to atheism. But the doorway to non-faith had been further exposed. After all, the idea that knowledge was strictly limited to what the senses provided seemed to leave no room for knowledge of God or even the soul. While God-fearing men still tended to attack materialism, science was in ascendancy and gaining momentum. In fact, this argument for universal mechanism led to (or seemed to confirm) the idea that if material affects our senses it could only be because our senses are themselves material: the seemingly metaphysical mind is merely the process of a purely physical brain.

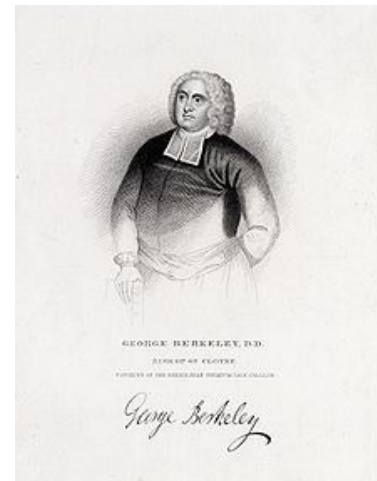
Not as direct or forceful in his language as Hobbes, Locke is inconsistent, self-contradictory and, here and there, leaves us uncertain of his meaning. While he seems to speak in plain enough terms, his definitions of those terms vary, particularly the term ‘idea.’ Sometimes it means ‘concept’, sometimes it means ‘sensation’, sometimes it means ‘thought’ or the whole of mental activity. Some of this was due to purposeful confusion. He often pauses, for instance, to mention that one thing or another of his arguments is thus ‘proved’ or has been previously proved in his treatise, when clearly it has not—clear, that is, to a philosopher or careful scholar. This confusion seems to have been aimed at keeping Locke out of trouble with ever-changing political authorities, so he often said the opposite of what he meant. He thus joins the many ‘esoteric’ writers of philosophy. Leo Strauss, all-time champion of eking out meaning in esoteric writing, suggests a complicated formula he has discovered regarding Locke’s work, including special reading of chapters according to their numerical placement—some to be taken seriously, others included to protect the writer from persecution. Strauss does not believe a philosopher of Locke’s caliber is capable of such obvious mistakes; much too obvious not to have another ‘secret’ meaning; a code that begs to be broken. So Locke’s influence on the development of modern political theory has had much to do with what any given theorist reads into him, or wants to hear from him, rather than what he truly meant. Thus, subject to widely differing interpretations, his work has led to various conflicting and contradictory philosophies by following one or another of the thought-paths he suggested—to such contrasting ends as the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution as compared to the Communist Manifesto.

The main accomplishment of Locke’s work was the further rejection of antiquity (even in the spirit of ‘that justly decried author’ Thomas Hobbes), the separation of government into ‘branches,’ and what Lilla calls the ‘Great Separation’ of church from state in the spirit of toleration—though in the New World, Roger Williams, having been banished from Massachusetts, was already living out that scenario in Rhode Island and writing about it [*Queries of Highest Consideration*, 1644] when Locke was but a lad of twelve. The rising winds of freedom were to be primarily westerlies.

Wouldn’t religious toleration include atheism?

George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne [1684-1753]

Bishop Berkeley tried to circumvent that problem and save God from extinction by carrying the materialist idea to absurdity (which is the ultimate means by which to refute any and all philosophy). If Locke’s premise were true, he reasoned (in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710): that we get knowledge only through the senses, and if the senses are deficient and give us imperfect, incomplete, and distorted impressions, it seems we cannot depend on the senses for truth about the outside world. In fact, we cannot determine with certainty that an outside world exists at all. In short, we cannot prove that ‘material’ is more than a figment of our imagination. All matter, as far as we can know it, is but a mental condition. Reason, then, indicates (as Descartes previously had argued) that the only certainty is our thinking—and clearly we can think of God. That’s how we know Him, and that is how we know the metaphysical (at least the mind) with greater certainty than



we know matter. “To exist is to be perceived”, Berkeley noted, attempting to prove the existence of God by the necessity of His omni-perception, making it possible for the whole world to continue to exist when major parts of it, at least, are not being noticed by his creations: other observers. In fact, matter was thus reduced to the metaphysical realm and materialism, he contended, was argued away.

When introduced to Bishop Berkeley’s concept Samuel Johnson remarked, “I refute it thus:” kicking a large stone” But Berkeley might have argued that the sensation of hardness and possible pain was only in Johnson’s mind, proving nothing. Yet—what if Johnson had broken his toe in refuting Berkeley, or even developed an obvious bruise (or simply moved the stone)? Would that not be a fact in the material world; one that could be experienced and attested by others (particularly Boswell, who recorded the incident in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*)? But Berkeley’s arguments were becoming the talk of the intelligentsia, however absurd they may have seemed to common sense (just as Zeno’s paradoxes seemed to the ancients, though they were unable to explain them away). It was *sense*, in fact (common or uncommon), that was in question here, and what must have



been seen by literate Europeans as laughably illogical seemed also impervious to reasoned rebuttal, thus becoming an intellectual hit.

David Hume [1711-1776]

Hume, taking Berkeley seriously, did to Berkeley what the clever Bishop had done to Locke in attempting to overthrow materialism. He took that argument to its logical absurdity in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, proving only that logic is not always reasonable and reason can be a tool of Loki. In this effort, though he denies being quite so extreme, he harkens back to Pyrrho of Elis [365-275 B.C.], who thought we could not know the true nature of anything and that wisdom is best effected by complete

suspension of judgment—a position we hear today, often voiced by folks who call themselves progressives. But this, if carried to its logical end, even Hume thought, would make a man unfit for a normal life and natural social interaction. He also rejected Descartes’ universal doubt, which, in order to get back from the one final truth of self-knowledge to a practical life in the material world, leaves one having to trust in many of the precepts and faculties that the Cartesian method caused him to cast overboard as doubtful while reasoning his way to the one, ‘clear and certain truth’: the *cogito*.

Hume agreed with Locke’s reasoning concerning perceptions: that, since we can clearly sense the material world, and sensation is all there is, the mind, too, must be somehow material in nature. For how could matter affect an incorporeal mind? But what is in the mind, Hume believed, is only the comparison of ideas, all of them derived from experience—the mind is nothing but “a bundle of perceptions.” (Are these ideas, then, also somehow material in nature?—‘real’ events? That remains a difficulty.) In any case, Hume argued that “by comparing ideas we can learn nothing about that which is not ideas. We can have no knowledge, strictly speaking, of the world of reality but only of the world of ideas” [*David Hume, Essay* by Robert S. Hill in Strauss/Cropsey, *HISTORY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY*; p.536].

Berkeley, too, then, was right to have doubted the existence of matter because our senses are deficient. Since the mind, too, is material (Hume implies), thought itself is ‘sensed’ and therefore in doubt. So we find ourselves in a position where nothing can be proved; *everything* is in perpetual doubt. Hume took this to mean that the methods of science itself are suspect. After all, science assumes causality and proceeds to discover (actually, Hume would say, ‘invent’) laws based on observation and controlled experiment. But where do we see such laws? And we see only the ‘apparent’ results even of ‘causality’, a principle which cannot be proven (however much it appeals to common sense) and so it, too, is a mental invention. All these *a priori* rules and principles, necessarily including the laws of physics, escape our perception; i.e., are non-sensible. Only mathematical formulae, he thinks, are true, and only because they are tautological. [$2 + 3 = 5$ is unalterably true because these are simply two different ways of expressing the same thing.] Hume may have considered himself moderately skeptical, but he was being rather modest in his assessment. In fact, skepticism had completely won the mind of Hume, such that “nothing was left,” says Will Durant; “and philosophy found itself in the midst of ruins of its own making.”

“When we run through libraries,” goes a remark famously attributed to Hume,

...what havoc must we make! If we take in our hands any volume of school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, ‘Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?’ No. ‘Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?’ No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

[See W.DURANT: THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY; Garden City, NY, 1927; p.281-282
Hume remark as quoted in ROYCE: THE SPIRIT OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY, Boston, 1892; p.98]

So we have come full circle since the dark ages when knowledge had practically been lost altogether. Then we saw the medieval scholastics rescuing ancient philosophy for the West (even while ‘adjusting’ it to suit Christian theology), thus spawning the Renaissance humanists who thought that great wisdom as well as a much superior culture lay in the distant past—a past they therefore thought should be recovered and revived. This was followed by the Copernican-Galilean revolt against the incapacity of Aristotelian and Ptolemaic concepts to present a cogent explanation of the workings of the world. Hence the invention of a new way to more certain knowledge based on reason and experiment: *the scientific method*—leaning on fact as opposed to authority and leading to the concept of the worthlessness of all historical thought that was not conducive to scientific knowledge based on physical reality; then to the suspicion of reason itself and the suggestion that even physical reality was doubtful; and now a published opinion by a brilliant and respected thinker that even the mental world was uncertain and the possibility that any real knowledge at all might be unattainable; that truth-seeking is futile.

To Recap:

Western thinkers proceeded from ignorance, due to loss of ancient knowledge, to renewed and inflated old knowledge; to not only new sorts of knowledge but a new means of gaining knowledge while discarding most of the old knowledge; then to doubts about the basis and certainty of the new knowledge; and all the way to doubting that certainty of any sort (beyond mathematics) was possible and considering even thinking itself could be an illusion. The intellectuals, as in every age, had taken flight in the world of their minds and sailed beyond earthbound reality. Fortunately, most folks had disembarked before take-off, along with Samuel Johnson who needed to bandage his toe.

HAND OUTS: (1) **Excerpt from Durants:** THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV; chapters XXI, *Faith & Reason in France* (pp.598-619), and XXIII *Leibnitz* (pp.658-681);
 (2) **Kant selection for Supplemental Reading:** *from Universal Natural History & Theory of the Heavens*, trans. by W. Hastie in Hastie(ed.): KANT'S COSMOGONY; James Maclehose & Sons, Glasgow, 1900; pp.17-34; 53-65 *as found in MODERN THEORIES OF THE UNIVERSE by Michael J. Crowe; Dover, 1994 pp.48-70 (incl. Crowe's commentary on Kant's vision).*