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The Theological Origins of Modernity

by **Michael Allen Gillespie***

Abstract

Most critiques of modernity rest on an inadequate understanding of its complexity. Modernity should be seen in terms of the question that guides modern thought. This is the question of divine omnipotence that arises out of the nominalist destruction of Scholasticism. Humanism, Reformation Christianity, empiricism, and rationalism are different responses to this question.

The emergence of modern age out of the medieval world has typically been understood as the triumph of light over darkness or reason over superstition. There have been many different explanations of this transformation, some emphasizing the distinctiveness of modernity, others its continuity with the preceding age. Perhaps the most widely held view today sees the modern era as the product of exceptional human beings, of brilliant scientists, philosophers, writers, and explorers who overcame the superstitions of their age and established a new world founded on reason. Seen in this way, modernity is the creation of Leonardo, Machiavelli, Columbus, Bacon, Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Newton, and any number of other thinkers, acting individually or collectively. This search for a founding father or fathers understands modernity as the product of human will that overthrew the medieval world. Modernity is thus pictured as a radical break with the past.

This vision of modernity was called into question in the earlier years of our century by scholars such as Etienne Gilson, who demonstrated that the supposed founders of the new age had in fact borrowed many of their essential ideas from their medieval predecessors (Gilson 1930; Koyré 1923). Neither they nor the age they “founded” was thus as original as they and their successors had maintained. Contemporary historians, often focusing on social history and the history of science, have tried to show that the transition from the medieval to the modern world was much more gradual than was hitherto believed. Indeed, when examined closely, these historians argue, there were many more similarities and continuities between the two epochs than the traditional view suggests (Funkenstein 1983).

In like vein, Karl Löwith argued in *Reason in History* that in many crucial respects modernity is the secularization of Christian ideals, and is thus not ultimately distinct from the Middle Ages. For example, Löwith views the notion of progress, which is so essential to the modern self-understanding, as the secularization of Christian millennialism. Understood in this way, the traditional account of the emergence of modernity as the triumph of reason over superstition is seriously flawed, blinding us to the continued existence of premodern irrationalism in the modern world.

The continuity thesis has been challenged in recent years by Hans Blumenberg (1996), who sees the modern age not as a secularized successor to the medieval world, but as something new and unique. However, he rejects the Kantian and Hegelian equation of modernity with reason in favor of the more Nietzschean view that identifies modernity with self-assertion. The self-assertion that characterizes the modern world, however, is not in his view merely a random will to power. Rather, it is directed at answering the question posed by the collapse of the medieval world. Modernity in this sense is the second overcoming of gnosticism, the doctrine that the cosmos is the creation of an evil spirit rather than of the transcendent God of salvation. A second overcoming is necessary because the first Christian attempt failed, leading to the destruction of Scholasticism by **nominalism** and the replacement of a God of reason by a God of will. In the wake of this failure, modernity attempted to establish a new ground in the notion of human self-assertion. Modernity in this sense is not a mere secularization of Christianity but something new and legitimate in its own right. Phenomena that look like secularized elements of the Christian view of the world are in fact only “reoccupations” of now-empty Christian positions, i.e., attempts to answer outmoded Christian questions in modern ways. The idea of progress, from this point of view, is not a secularized form of Christian millennialism but rather the reoccupation of the medieval need to show God’s hidden hand in all events. According to Blumenberg, the misperceived need to answer such now-meaningless questions has blurred our understanding of modernity and led us incorrectly to delegitimize the modern enterprise.

While all of these views of the origin of the modern world deserve more attention than I can give them here, I would like to present in brief compass another description of the origin of modern thought that draws upon these accounts but also goes beyond them in a variety of ways. Modernity, I want to suggest, arose not in opposition to the medieval world but out of its rubble. Superior or more powerful modern ideas thus did not drive out or overcome medieval ideas, as is often maintained; rather, they toppled the ruins of medieval ideas that had remained standing after the internecine struggle that brought the medieval world to an end. Modern “reason” was thus able to overcome medieval “superstition” and “dogma” only because these were fatally weakened by the destruction of the world in which they made sense.

The destruction of the medieval world, however, did not merely open up space for new ideas and a new way of life. It also presented humanity with a new and perplexing problem that has guided human thought in important ways ever since. Modernity came into being not in a vacuum, but in response to the particular crisis engendered by the collapse of the medieval world, and modernity can best be understood as a series of diverse answers to the profound question opened up by this crisis. No single principle defines the modern project. Modernity is not subjectivity or autonomy or technology or progress or representation or any other one thing, and the attempt to reduce modernity to any one of these fails to capture its richness and variety.¹ Modernity, however, is also not sheer diversity or a mere collection of arbitrary ideas. All of modernity’s diverse moments are “essentially” related through the question they seek to answer. The question as a *question* defines the realm of possible answers and thus limits the possible diversity of modernity, but it does not determine which of these answers is correct. In order to come to terms with modernity, we thus need to come to terms with the modern question that lies at the threshold of modernity.

The medieval view of the world was a synthesis of Christianity and pagan philosophy, or, as it is more characteristically put, of reason and revelation. The grounds for this connection were already present in the origin and development of early Christianity in the Hellenistic world. After its adoption as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity was even more thoroughly infused with and informed by Greek philosophy. However, the tension between revelation, with its emphasis on divine omnipotence and incarnation, on one hand, and philosophical rationalism and the notion of a rational cosmos, on the other, was not easily resolved, and remained a problem for Christianity throughout its long history. Indeed, one might argue that much, if not all, of Christian theology was made necessary by the continual and periodically deepening antagonism of these two moments.

Scholasticism was the greatest and most comprehensive theological attempt to resolve this tension. While there was considerable variety within Scholasticism, in its classic Thomist version it took the form of realism. Realism, as the Scholastics understood it, has little to do with realism as we understand it today. Scholastic realism was a belief in the extramental existence of universals. Drawing heavily upon Neoplatonism and a one-sided reading of Aristotle, Scholastic realists argued that universals such as species and genera were the ultimately real things, and that individual beings were merely moments or expressions of one of these universals. Moreover, these universals were nothing other than divine reason made known to man either by illumination, as Augustine had suggested, or through the investigation of nature, as Aquinas and others argued. Within this realist ontology,

hierarchy, Pope John XXII granted the moderates their dispensation while condemning and hunting down the most zealous Franciscans, the so-called Fraticelli. He did not stop there. Drawn into a dispute with the Franciscan order and its governor general over the issue of poverty (the so-called Poverty Dispute), he ultimately condemned the Franciscan belief in the moral superiority of the ascetic life, arguing that this contradicted Scripture.

Without entering into the theological merits of this dispute, it is clear that the pope recognized not only the threat to his power within the Church but also the radical transformation of Christianity that the Franciscan vision entailed. Man, as Francis understood him, is not by nature an exalted being. His joy comes not from his place or his possessions in the world but from his nearness to God. Taken to its extreme, such a doctrine is not merely an attack on priestly wealth and power, it is also an attack on all clerical (and political) hierarchy.

One of the leading spokesmen for the Franciscan side in this debate was William of Ockham. The pope based his argument against the superiority of poverty on Scripture, i.e., on God's *potentia ordinata*. The Franciscans by contrast rested their case on God's *potentia absoluta*. When the Pope declared that there was no difference between the two, Ockham and the Franciscans were horrified. They saw this as the revival of Abelard's heretical position that God is bound for all eternity by his previous will to save some specific souls. God, they argued, is not bound in this or any other way save the principle of noncontradiction; he is free and sovereign at every moment. To deny this fact was to deny God. They consequently proclaimed the pope a heretic.

In this sense, **nominalism** was Franciscan theology. It destroyed the order of the world that Scholasticism had imagined mediates between God and man, replacing it with a chaos of radically individual beings. However, it united each of these beings directly with God. Thus, from the Franciscan point of view, life seems chaotic only to those who do not see the unity of creation in God. For those, such as Francis, who share in this mystical unity, all other beings are their brothers, since all animate and inanimate beings are equally the creatures of God.

While the most zealous Franciscans were constrained by moderates within the order and by the Inquisition, the efforts of the Church to suppress **nominalism** as a whole were a manifest failure. Although Ockham's thought was censured in 1326 and repeatedly condemned from 1339 to 1347, his influence continued to grow. Indeed, during the 150 years after his death, **nominalism** became one of the most powerful intellectual movements in Europe. There was a strong Ockhamist tradition in England under the leadership of Thomas Bradwardine, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and later under Robert Holcot and Adam Woodham. The Ockhamists were equally strong in Paris under the leadership of Nicholas of Autrecourt and John of Mirecourt. Spain remained an exception, but the influence of nominalist thought grew to such an extent in other European countries that by the time of Luther there was only one university in Germany that was not dominated by the nominalists.

Nominalism sought to tear the rationalistic veil from the face of God. It revealed a capricious God, fearsome in his power, unknowable, unpredictable, unconstrained by nature and reason, and indifferent to good and evil. This vision turned the order of nature into a random collection of individual beings and the order of logic into a mere concatenation of names. Man was dethroned from his exalted place in the natural order of things and cast adrift in an infinite cosmos with no natural law to guide him and no certain path to salvation. It is not surprising that for all but the most extreme ascetics and mystics, the dark God of **nominalism** proved to be a profound source of anxiety and insecurity.

While the influence of this new vision of God derived much of its force from the power of the idea of omnipotence itself, the concrete conditions of life in the latter half of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries played an essential role in its success. During this period, three momentous events—the Black Death, the Papal Schism, and the Hundred Years War—shook the foundations of medieval civilization. While the nominalist vision of God might have been regarded by most as an absurdity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the tumult and horror of the succeeding period helped make such a God believable.

The Middle Ages end with the triumph of the nominalist vision of God. The Scholastic enterprise, of course, was not simply abandoned. It was repeatedly revived in a number of forms, but never with the same global aspirations. Even Francisco Suarez, Aquinas's greatest defender and the last great Scholastic, was at heart a nominalist. On one level, he supported Thomistic realism, arguing for the extramental existence of universals, but at a deeper level he twisted this argument in a nominalistic fashion, asserting that every individual being was a universal. The world in which modernity came to be was thus not the world of Scholasticism but the world of Scholasticism overturned. This collapse did not occur all at once or in a short space of time, but it was well underway by the end of the fourteenth century.

Renaissance Humanism

As Ockham and Pope John XXII were fighting the final theological battle of the Middle Ages in the simple cells and papal palaces of Avignon, a young Florentine with a great love of old books was preparing himself a few miles away for a lifelong job that would help to define the new age. This student was the young Petrarch, whose exiled father, a lawyer, had come to Avignon in 1313 seeking employment in the papal bureaucracy. We do not know how closely he followed the debate between Ockham and the Pope, but he must have been aware of at least its general outlines. He had taken ecclesiastical orders in 1326 and was supported by the powerful and influential Colonna family, whose affairs were deeply entangled with those of the pope and the clerical hierarchy. Given these connections and concerns, it seems likely that Petrarch was intimately acquainted with the Poverty Dispute and the theological positions of both sides.

Like Ockham, Petrarch rejected Scholasticism. He and most of the humanists who followed him were convinced of the nominalist contention that God could not be philosophically comprehended. As Francesco Guicciardini (1965, 64) put it, God's "ways are so past finding out, that they are rightly called abyssus multa." The humanists saw Scholasticism not as a coherent body of wisdom but rather as a collection of thousands of insane ideas (Guicciardini 1965, 72–73)—much as it appears to many modern thinkers. As Erasmus put it, Scholasticism is "higher lunacy" (Flynn 1983, 5).

Petrarch, and humanism generally, grew up in the intellectual space created by the nominalist destruction of Scholasticism. Like the nominalists, the humanists hoped to renew Christianity. Petrarch, for example, was clearly aware of the corruption of the Church, but he was also convinced of the essential goodness of Christianity. His model for Christian renewal, however, was not the Gospels or Franciscan asceticism but the Hellenized Christianity of the ancient world. What was necessary was thus not an *imitatio Christi* but an encounter with the Bible in its original languages and classical context. Such an approach to Scripture, he felt, would make it possible to wipe away the centuries-old accretions of meaning that had corrupted Christianity. This was a vast project that involved not only learning the original languages but also publishing the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, as well as the supporting historical, philosophic, and literary texts of the ancient world. It occupied the humanists for two centuries and was (they believed) one of their crowning achievements. The sixteenth-century French humanist Loys le Roy (1944) was typical in claiming that the theology that had been destroyed by Scholasticism had been successfully rejuvenated by the humanist retrieval of the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew.

The humanists' concern with the ancient world was not confined to religious texts and practices. They also sought to retrieve and popularize the works of pagan authors. The retrieval of these ancient works gave rise to an admiration and emulation of pagan models. In sharp contrast to the ascetic element in late medieval Christianity so evident in the Franciscans, the love of honor and beauty again became preeminent human motives as a result of the humanists' activities. While humanism remained generally Christian, it thus envisioned a new kind of man with new virtues.

The humanist's model for this new man was ostensibly the great-souled man of antiquity. Profound differences, however, separated the humanists from the ancients. The foremost of these was the notion of individuality that was so central to humanist thinking. This notion of individuality is vibrantly portrayed in such works as Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* and *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, each of which describes a man who is a world unto himself. The heroes of Machiavelli's *Prince*—Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus—are similarly independent men, fatherless and forced from birth to depend upon themselves. The preeminent literary example of humanist individualism is Montaigne, who claims to have created himself in and through his Essays, a work he refers to in the preface as "the book of the self." The ideal for the Greek artist and citizen, in contrast, was not the formation of individual character or personality but assimilation to a universal ideal. Renaissance humanism does not put the human *per se* at the center of the world but the *individual* human being, and in this respect it owes a deeper debt to **nominalism** than to the ancients.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's famous account, "The Dignity of Man," makes this debt to **nominalism** clear. He writes,

Finally, the Great Artisan ordained that man, to whom He could give nothing belonging only to himself, should share in common whatever properties had been peculiar to each of the other creatures. He received man, therefore, as a creature of undetermined nature, and placing him in the middle of the universe, said this to him:

"Neither an established place, nor a form belonging to you alone, nor any special function have We given to you, O Adam, and for this reason that you may have and possess, according to your desire and judgment, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever functions you shall desire. The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within the bounds prescribed by Us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand I have placed you. I have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily survey whatever is in the world. We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, more freely and more honorably the molder and maker of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer. You shall be able to descend among the lower forms of being which are brute beasts; you shall be able to lie reborn out of the judgment of your own soul into the higher beings, which are divine."... To him it was granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills.... And if, content with the lot of no created being, he withdraws into the center of his own oneness, his spirit, made one with God in the solitary darkness of the Father, which is above all

things, will surpass all things. (Ross and McLaughlin 1953, 477–79)

Pico's man has no specific nature. He is not the rational animal standing at the peak of creation. He has no natural form or end. Like Ockham, Pico believes that man is characterized by his free will. The humanists' understanding of free will, however, differs in one decisive respect from the will that Ockham and **nominalism** attribute to man. It is not only a created will but a self-creating one. God grants man the capacity to will, and man then makes himself into what he wants to be. This notion of a self-willing being has clear affinities to the model of the nominalist God. Like the God who creates him, this man is an artisan, but an artisan whose greatest work of art is himself. This man is a maker, a poet in the most literal sense, able to identify with every being and make himself into any one of them. But man is not constrained to be finite; he can emulate and become one with God himself, because as a willing being he already in some sense *is* God. Such a oneness with God, however, is a retreat into darkness, a retreat from the world and the power in it. While Pico holds open the possibility of a quasi-divinity for man, it is a divinity of stillness and withdrawal, not of creative omnipotence.

This limitation on man is set by the world he inhabits—the nominalist chaos of motion that, by its very capriciousness, limits the power of individuals to achieve mastery (Trinkhaus 1992, 187–98). Art can give form to things; through it man can paint pictures, shape marble, build palaces, and even create states, but fortune will eventually bring all to ruin.⁴ Thus, even the greatest of princes, Machiavelli argues, will be able to master fortune only half the time. While man is a free being and in some sense already divine, he is not omnipotent, for as a finite being he has both a childhood and a dotage in which he is dependent upon others, and a death that inevitably brings his rule to an end.

This humanist idea of fortune reflects an underlying notion of time as degeneration, as antagonistic to form, as corrosive. Form and purpose do not inhere in nature but are the products of an artistic will that builds dikes against the floods of fortune—dikes, however, that fortune ultimately overflows. The humanists' pessimism about the capacity of art to master nature was reflected in their understanding of their own place in time. They knew that the magnificent world of the ancients that they so admired had perished and been superseded by a dark, Gothic age. They hoped to establish a new golden age but they never imagined it would last forever or dreamed that it might be successively improved for all eternity.

Humanism grows out of **nominalism** and offers a solution to many of the problems posed by divine omnipotence. This solution is itself constructed on nominalist grounds, i.e., on the understanding of man as a willing being, although it is only successful because it vastly narrows the ontological difference that **nominalism** put between man and God. The consequent vision of the superior individual, towering, as Shakespeare's Cassius puts it, over his fellows like a colossus, was thus something distinctively new and a clear step beyond the Middle Ages.⁵ This vision played an important role in the development of modernity, particularly in the formation of the later notions of subjectivity and autonomy. It would, however, be a mistake to believe that this notion of individuality was simply superseded and sublated by these later concepts. It remains a continuing if less obvious strain of modernity.

The Reformation

Humanism sought to answer the problem posed by divine omnipotence by imagining a new kind of human being who could secure himself in the chaotic world **nominalism** had posited, which the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries themselves had seemed to embody. This movement drew upon antiquity but was also deeply and decisively indebted to the nominalist revolution in thought. The second major attempt to come to terms with the problem of the nominalist God was the Lutheran Reformation. It too grew out of **nominalism**, but followed a much different path than Renaissance humanism, not away from God toward man but from man back to God.

The Reformation was not simply or even primarily a response to the problem posed by **nominalism** and the idea of divine omnipotence. It was rather an effort to reform the Church and eliminate the abuses that had crept into its practices over many years. Such a reformation had been demanded from various quarters for over two centuries. The papal schism had played an important role in making the defects of the Church visible, but that problem paled beside the increasingly mercenary and corrupt practices of the clerical hierarchy itself, portrayed so explicitly by Boccaccio and other humanist authors. The Poverty Dispute in an indirect way turned on this issue as did, more directly, Savonarola's rebellion in Florence. Luther's rebellion against the Church was also clearly a reaction to corruption within the Church. All of these factors notwithstanding, I want to suggest that the particular form that the Reformation took was determined on a deeper spiritual level by the problem of the nominalist God, and that this idea of God played a decisive role both in framing the issues of the Reformation and in shaping its results.

The Reformation has often been described as the last great upsurge of medieval religion. While this interpretation is certainly true in some sense, it fails to recognize the astonishing extent to which Reformation Christianity, at least as developed by Luther, rejects medieval Christianity on essentially nominalist grounds. Like Ockham, Luther was an Augustinian. His attachment to Ockham, however, goes well beyond this superficial affiliation. Before taking monastic orders, Luther studied at the University of Erfurt with Trutvetter and Ulsingen, who were both nominalists and followers of Ockham. Under their influence, Luther himself became an enthusiastic adherent of Ockhamism (Meier 1950, 56–67; Vignaux 1935; Courtenay 1974, 58). He asserted that Ockham was his master and referred to the Ockhamists as his sect. From his earliest acquaintance with **nominalism**, however, Luther was troubled by the impenetrability of the God **nominalism** described and tormented by the resulting uncertainty of his own salvation (Bainton 1950, 169). Indeed, he joined the monastic order of Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt in hope of finding relief from this doubt.

The education and training he received as a member of this order, however, did little to quell his inner uncertainty. This course of study was also deeply nominalist. He studied the Bible, the Sentences of Peter Lombard, the works of Ockham and of his disciples D'Ailly and Biel, as well as the work of St. Bernard, Duns Scotus, and Augustine. These theological studies hardly comforted him. Indeed, this further nominalist training, with its emphasis on divine omnipotence and indifference, only served to magnify Luther's spiritual disquiet. His concern with personal salvation could not be stilled by a God who was unstillness itself, who today might save the saints and damn the sinners but tomorrow do exactly the reverse.

Luther's personal quest for the certainty of salvation would be of little interest to us if it had not become intertwined with his struggle against corruption in the Church. In the context of this movement of reform, the spiritual questions that dominated Luther's personal life and the answers he found to them became decisive elements of European intellectual development.

The corruption of the Church was bound up in Luther's mind with the sale of indulgences. The justification for indulgences was the notion that punishment for sins could be remitted as a consequence of good works. In the Christian context, however, this notion skirted very close to the heretical doctrine that one could earn salvation. In principle, the Church claimed only that an indulgence remitted earthly punishment. Moreover, the Church also required a demonstration of sincere repentance from the sinner. The legitimacy of this practice, however, was weakened by the substitution of cash contributions to the Church for actual works, and by the suggestion of those who sold the indulgences that they freed sinners not only from punishment in this life but also in the next world. It was thus possible to obtain indulgences even for those who were already dead. In practice, the doctrine of indulgences was consequently little more than a vehicle for turning sin and repentance into gold.

Luther and many others detested this practice and regarded it as proof of the corruption of the Church. Luther agreed wholeheartedly with his Ockhamist teachers that God was no man's debtor. Consequently, he was convinced that no priest or pope could accept payment on God's behalf, since, as he stated in the 95 Theses, God alone can remit sin. Luther, however, disagreed not merely with the sale of indulgences but with the notion that works of any sort can gain remission of sin.

Luther rejected the doctrine of works on nominalistic grounds. The idea that good works can bring about the remission of sin rests upon the notion that it is not the intention or will behind the action but the action itself and its real ends in the world that count. Sin in this sense has principally to do with consequences. In a world that looks primarily to consequences, it is possible to construct a calculus in which good works can counterbalance evil ones, regardless of how they are attained or whether they are produced by piety or merely by the desire to avoid damnation. However, if what is preeminent in God and by extension in man is the will, then sins can be remitted only through right willing, regardless of the result. Indeed, the right consequence is acceptable only as the result of a right will. "Good works," Luther (1960, 297) argues, "do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works."

While Luther rejects the redemptive power of works on nominalist grounds, he does not accept the nominalist/Franciscan alternative of asceticism and salvation by grace alone. It was precisely this alternative that so tormented him. Luther's answer to the question of indulgences thus is also his answer to the problem of the nominalist God. "Faith alone saves." Only willing rightly can guarantee salvation.

Luther's answer to the problem of salvation grows out of the nominalist notion of man as a willing being but transfigures this notion by reconfiguring the relationship of divine and human will. Faith, according to Luther, is the will to union with God, the love of God (1960, 277). This love evokes from a gracious God love in return. Human beings in this sense enter into a marriage with Christ in which Christ takes the sins of the lover upon himself (1960, 268–87). Through faith, one is thus liberated from sin. The marriage of God and man is based upon complete trust, for "when the soul firmly trusts to God's promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous" (ibid., 284). The faith or trust that Luther refers to here is trust in Scripture, for "faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the word of God" (ibid., 280). Faith in Scripture, in other words, guarantees salvation.

At first glance, it is difficult to see how Scripture solves the problem that **nominalism** posed, since reliance on Scripture seems to rest on the supremacy of God's ordained power, which **nominalism** explicitly denied. The nominalists argued that God is not bound by his own revealed will. Luther's elevation of Scripture transforms this doctrine. Scripture for

Luther is not simply an objective text, but the individual experience that occurs in the encounter with the text.⁶ The text is the word of God, and in and through Scripture God speaks directly to man. Faith arises from an inner certainty or illumination that comes about in the experience of this voice of God, in the personal relationship it establishes between the individual and God. There is thus no need for a priestly intermediary to interpret God's word. Indeed, the priest actually cuts one off from the word of God, putting himself and the dogma of the Church between God and man. There is and can be no dogma, "no fixed rules for the interpretation of the word of God, since the word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound" (Luther 1960, 274). God does not need to be explained; he can speak for himself and does speak for himself to everyone who listens. All believers in this sense can be priests, if only the word of God is available to them in a language they can understand (Luther 1960, 289). Hence, the Bible must be translated into the vernacular and made available to all.

The word of God properly experienced thus guides and constrains human will. The importance of this fact is made clear in Luther's famous refusal to recant at the Diet at Worms. Luther argues:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by an evident reason—for I confide neither in the pope nor in a council alone, since it is certain that they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am held fast by the Scriptures adduced by me, and my conscience is taken captive by God's Word, and I neither can nor will revoke anything seeing that it is not safe or right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen. (Rogge 1971, 100–101)

Man can will rightly only when he is taken prisoner by God's word, i.e., only when he is directed by God's will, when his will is God's will. Right willing, however, is the source of true freedom. Thus, the subjection of the human will to the divine will liberates the Christian from all other bonds. "A Christian," Luther (1960, 277) thus concludes, "is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none."

The notion of God acting in and through us is the basis for Luther's transformation of **nominalism**. Luther describes the insight that made this transformation possible. Having long been troubled by the justice of God referred to in Romans, Luther determined to work through the text again to see whether he had properly understood the passage that caused him so much suffering. In rereading the passage, he had a profound spiritual insight. The "justice of God" did not refer to something abstract and distant, to an attribute of a transcendent God such as **nominalism** had imagined, but to God's justification of us. Similarly, "the power of God" referred to that by which God makes us powerful, and "his wisdom" to that by which he makes us wise (Luther 1967, 6:421–28). In this way, Luther was able to transform the abstract and distant God of **nominalism** into an inward power that suffused individual human beings. The faith that arises from the encounter with God's word in Scripture thus works in us and transforms us. Through it we are reborn in God because God comes to dwell in us (Luther 1854, 63:124–25).

Ockham proclaimed the individuality of every being as a unique creation of God but saw in the ontological difference between God and man an impenetrable barrier to human understanding and an insuperable barrier to the human will. Only through Scripture could one know God and what God wants from us, but even Scripture reveals only the momentary determination of a distant God's will, which might at any instant be otherwise. Luther too sees God as a *deus absconditus* who cannot be philosophically analyzed or understood. He too turns to Scripture as the sole source of guidance. In contrast to the nominalists, however, he maintains that the ontological difference between God and man is not complete, that there can be a kind of correspondence between God's will and our own not at a rational but at an affective level, a marriage of the spirit that can give us certainty of salvation and banish all doubts. Unlike the humanists, however, Ockham believes that this is not because man wills as God wills, freely and creatively, but is instead because man wills what God wills, because he is the agent of divine will. Man does not become a demigod but becomes the dwelling place of God; God becomes the interior and guiding principle of his life, or what Luther typically calls conscience.

Neither the humanists nor the reformers saw themselves as founding a revolutionary new age. Both in fact saw their projects as efforts of retrieval or renewal. Thus, neither movement understood itself as initiating or participating in a distinctively modern project. However, as we have seen, both Renaissance humanism and Reformation theology represent new and distinct modes of thought that arose in response to the same fundamental question. It would also be a mistake to believe that they are simply replaced by or embodied in succeeding forms of modern thought. While the humanist focus on self-willing individuality and Luther's idea of the God within play an important role in later intellectual developments, they cannot simply be reduced to subjectivity or autonomy, even if subjectivity and autonomy as we understand them are inconceivable without these previous developments.⁷ In response to the challenge posed by the nominalist God, both humanism and Reformation theology hold up a new image of man and of God. Neither, however, focuses on the order or disorder of creation itself. It was this question that Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, and Descartes addressed, and it was as a result of their investigations that modernity became conscious of itself as something distinctively new.

The Arrival of Modernity

Modernity proper begins with the scientific project that aims at making man master and possessor of nature. This project, as Hans Blumenberg and Amos Funkenstein have shown in great detail, is deeply indebted to **nominalism** in many different and important ways. I will not repeat their arguments here, but I will briefly try to summarize the general character of nominalist influence.

As we saw above, **nominalism** destroys the ontological ground of medieval science by positing an unpredictable world of radically individual and thus radically different beings. Indeed, from the nominalist point of view, the world itself is only a higher-order sign, an aid to the understanding that does not correspond to any reality. **Nominalism** thus seems to make science impossible. In fact, however, modern science develops as the result of a reconsideration of the meaning of nominalist ontology.

Scholastic metaphysics understood God as the highest being and creation as a rational order of beings stretching up to God. From the nominalist perspective, however, such an order is untenable not only because each being is radically individual but also, and perhaps more importantly, because God himself is not a being in the same sense as all created beings. While Ockham points to this gulf between God and his creation, he does not extensively explore it. This task was undertaken by another thinker whose path crossed Ockham's in Avignon, the German mystic Meister Eckhart.

Eckhart was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, although his Neoplatonism was transfigured by his mysticism. Like Ockham, Eckhart saw an infinite distance between God and the world. From the perspective of the beings we encounter in everyday life, God thus seems to be nothing. In Eckhart's view, however, this issue must be examined from a divine rather than a human perspective, not logically but mystically. From the divine perspective, it is not God but the beings of the world that are nothing, or at least they are nothing without God. Since, however, these beings in some sense "are," they must "be" God, i.e., God must be "in" beings in some way. Without him, they would be pure nothingness. The infinite difference between God and his creation, however, means that God cannot be in things as their whatness or essence. God, Eckhart suggests, is in them in a different sense, as their how, the operative force that determines their becoming. In nominalistic terms, God is pure willing, pure activity, or pure power, and the world in its becoming is divine will; it is thus God. Or in more modern terms, the world is the ceaseless motion that is determined by divine will, which is nothing other than efficient or mechanical causality. The world is the incarnation, the body of God, and he is in the world as the soul is in the body, omnipresent as the motive principle.⁸

Creation is thus not simply disorder. God is in the world in a new and different sense than Scholasticism and traditional metaphysics imagined. He is not the ultimate whatness or quiddity of all beings but their howness or becoming. To discover the divinely ordered character of the world, then, it is necessary to investigate becoming, which is to say that it is necessary to discover the laws governing the motion of all beings. Theology and natural science in this sense are one and the same.

Empiricism and rationalism both work within this general understanding of the relationship of God to his creation but they differ considerably in their understanding of the meaning of this relationship. Rationalism, for the most part, understands the identification of God and his creation pantheistically. The motion of nature is the motion of God, and nature's laws are the forms and structures of divine will. Rationalist science thus is theologically grounded not in Scripture, but in the deduction of the laws of motion from transcendental freedom.

Empiricism, by contrast, understands the meaning of the identification of God and creation atheistically.⁹ To say that Ockham's God is in everything, as Eckhart (and later Nicholas of Cusa) suggested, is to say that everything is sheer willfulness, motion without purpose or end, and without any necessary regularity. Viewed in this manner, there is no effective difference between the nominalist cosmos and a godless universe of matter in motion. The existence or nonexistence of God is irrelevant, since he can neither intensify nor diminish the chaos of radical individuality that characterizes existence. So science does not need to take God or Scripture into account in its efforts to come to terms with the natural world; it can rely instead on experience alone. "Atheistic" empiricism in this sense has its origin in nominalist theology. Empiricism, it is true, also draws upon ancient atomism and Epicureanism, but both of these are received and understood within an essentially nominalist vision of the world.

The rationalist and empiricist views of change as a manifestation of divine will provide the ontological foundation for the self-consciousness of modernity. Since Plato, being had been understood as timeless, unchanging presence. Change was always a falling away from being, degeneration. **Nominalism** called this notion into question with its assertion that God himself was not only subject to change but was perhaps even change itself. The changeable cosmos was no longer seen as inherently imperfect, and change could hardly be derided as degeneration. While this new view of becoming was never entirely spelled out and was constantly troubling to modern thinkers who strove repeatedly to discover an unchanging "ontological" ground of becoming, it was a crucial step away from both ancient and medieval notions of time and change.

If change is not simply degeneration, then some change may be progressive. Change guided by an enlightened human will may produce some good. In this way progress is opened up as a human possibility. The ability of the will to master the world was already clear to Renaissance humanists such as Machiavelli, but their reliance on *individual* prowess and intelligence made a thorough mastery of nature inconceivable to them. Human finitude meant that even the greatest individuals would inevitably succumb to all-conquering time. Mastering nature would require something more than merely individual will. Early modern thinkers saw science not as an individual accomplishment but as a broadly based social or political enterprise, embodying a human will of unlimited longevity that might finally master the natural world.

We can see the profound influence of **nominalism** on early modern science in the thought of Francis Bacon, often characterized as the father of empiricism. Like his nominalist predecessors, Bacon rejects realism both in its Scholastic and in its classical form. He agrees with the nominalists that “in nature nothing really exists besides individual bodies, performing pure individual acts” (Bacon 1960, 122). Accordingly, the universe is a labyrinth that is impenetrable to unaided human reason (*ibid.*, 12).

Previous thinkers, in Bacon’s view, did not make any progress through this labyrinth because they did not use the powers available to them to attain this end, relying instead on mere observation and overhasty generalization (1960, 3). Bacon describes the various reasons for this ineptitude in great detail in *The New Organon* in his famous discussion of the four idols or false notions that have become rooted in the mind (*ibid.*, 47–66). Humans have come to believe that all they need to know comes from their immediate experience, making them unwilling or unable to verify their generalizations by the examination of particulars. They have been content to guess rather than know and have put the dreams of the imagination in place of real knowledge (*ibid.*, 23, 29). Even in his own time, when realism had been called into question, Bacon believed that men were still deterred from such an investigation by an undue reverence for antiquity and by the belief that scientific progress was impossible because of the obscurity of nature, the shortness of life, the deceitfulness of the senses, the weakness of the judgment, the difficulty of experiment, and the like (*ibid.*, 80–90). What is needed, he argued, is a total reconstruction of science, the arts, and human knowledge on a proper foundation (1960, 4).

The knowledge that Bacon sought differs profoundly from that of Scholasticism. He was not concerned with what nature is and what it tends toward, i.e., with the formal or final cause of things, but with the particular character and motion of matter, i.e., with material and efficient causality. His goal was not theory or speculation but the betterment of the human condition (1960, 23, 78, 118, 267). Knowledge of how nature works rather than what it is will allow us to make it produce things that are useful to human life; when we understand the properties of particulars, we will be able to bring them together in ways that will achieve the effects we desire. This requires a model of nature not as a static system of categories but as a dynamic whole, as the interacting operation of all of particulars (*ibid.*, 5, 132).¹⁰ To understand nature in this way is to comprehend nature as power.

Although this power can carry humanity to hitherto unimaginable heights, it can only be gained by first lowering oneself, subordinating oneself to nature and limiting the exercise of one’s own will. To master and command nature, it is necessary first to be its servant and interpreter. For Bacon, the goal of science is thus not the mere

felicity of speculation, but the real business and fortunes of the human race, and all power of operation. For man is but the servant and interpreter of nature: what he does and what he knows is only what he has observed of nature’s order in fact or in thought; beyond this he knows nothing and can do nothing. For the chain of causes cannot by any force be loosened or broken, nor can nature be commanded except by being obeyed. And so these twin objects, human Knowledge and human Power, do really meet in one; and it is from ignorance of causes that operation fails. (Bacon 1960, 29; see also 39)

The presupposition of such scientific knowledge is the humiliation of the human spirit, since success depends upon abandoning our proud belief that we occupy a superior place in the order of creation. Instead of acting as lords of creation, we must become apprentices in nature’s workshop (*ibid.*, 13, 66, 119). We do not need great wit or individual excellence, but dogged persistence and obedience to the surest rules and demonstrations (*ibid.*, 6, 112).

While humility gains us entrance to the study of nature, cruelty is the means by which we reach our end. Mere experience will take us only into nature’s outer courts. To reach its inner chambers, we must tear it to pieces, constraining, vexing, dissecting, and torturing it to force it to reveal the secret entrances to its treasure chambers (Bacon 1960, 20, 22, 25, 95, 113). Only as merciless servants who bind and torture their master to learn the source of his power can we win from nature the knowledge of its hidden forces and operation. On the basis of this knowledge, we can then produce “a line and race of inventions that may in some degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity” (*ibid.*, 23).

Bacon thus offers a new and revolutionary answer to the problem posed by **nominalism** and the nominalist God. He confronts and accepts the nominalist vision of the world and attempts to find a solution to its fundamental problems. He seeks neither a poetic transfiguration of this world nor a new covenant with its God. Instead, he strives to discover the hidden powers by which it moves in order to gain mastery over it. For Bacon as for Ockham and Machiavelli, man is a willing being who seeks to secure himself in the world. In contrast to both Franciscan asceticism and the humanist notion of godlike individuality, however, Bacon imagines man to be a relatively weak and fearful being who can succeed only by consistently working with his fellow human beings over many years to learn nature’s laws and turn this knowledge to human use. The democratic character of Bacon’s project makes its success conceivable. It does not depend upon the exercise of great and thus rare genius, but upon the consistent application of ordinary intelligence to a series of small problems that can be easily solved. Bacon in this sense differs considerably from his humanist predecessors. The hero of knowledge Bacon imagines in his *New Atlantis*, for example, is not a sparkling “great-souled man,” but a solemn, priestlike, and ultimately nerdy scientist who is willing to investigate not merely the beautiful and noble but the low and foul, for he knows, like Bacon, that “whatever deserves to exist deserves also to be known” (1960, 109).

While Bacon laid the first bricks of the new science on a nominalistic foundation, it was Galileo, Hobbes, and Descartes who raised its walls. Bacon’s method, in fact, was ill suited to the comprehension of nature understood as matter in motion. Its unmitigated nominalistic focus on individual beings and its inductive method rendered it incapable of grasping motion as such. Galileo’s transposition of motion into the abstract world of geometry and his new understanding of inertia were crucial steps that made modern mathematical science possible (Spragens 1973, 60–74). On this foundation, Hobbes and Descartes developed alternative visions of the modern scientific enterprise.

Modernity and Freedom

The differences between Hobbes and Descartes are crucial and central to the bifurcation of modernity. One strain of modern thought begins with Bacon and includes Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Mill, and many contemporary Anglo-American thinkers. A second tendency begins with Descartes and includes Leibniz, Malebranche, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and most of the contemporary Continental philosophers. These two traditions of thought represent alternative answers to the fundamental problem posed by the nominalist God within the framework of the notion of modern science. The differences between them turn on a number of issues, but the question of the place and nature of the self is of central importance.¹¹

For Bacon, man is a part of nature. Thus, he “can do so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature. Beyond this he neither knows anything nor can do anything” (1960, 39). As a natural being, man is subject to all the constraints of nature, even though he can ameliorate his condition and, in a limited sense, master the natural world. We see a similar and fuller account of the limits of human nature in Hobbes, for whom man is also a piece of nature—a particular body in motion. As with the nominalists, for Hobbes natural motion is not teleologically ordered but disordered, attracted to no end, merely pushed by collisions with other individual objects. Man is moved not by his free will or by divine inspiration but by an infinite succession of causal motions. According to the law of inertia that governs all matter in motion, each human body will remain moving unless its motion is contravened by collision with another body. Such a collision is conflict and war. In a densely packed world, the natural state of man is a state of war. The purpose of science, as Hobbes understands it, is to organize the motion of both human and nonhuman bodies to maximize the unimpeded motion of human beings—what Hobbes understands as their freedom.

I do not claim that Hobbes’s political theory follows from his physics; I want only to note the severe constraints that Hobbes imposes on the human will. Hobbes (1961, 127) seems at times to deny the human capacity for free willing altogether, characterizing will as simply the last appetite before action. For Hobbes as for Bacon, human life is lived within nature and is always constrained by the natural world. Man is more a creature than a creator, more governed by laws than law-giving. He is not a transcendent being who might imagine himself a god, but an impelled object whose chief desire is to continue on his prescribed course with the least interference from others.

The limitations that Hobbes places upon human freedom and will are characteristic of the empirical tradition. This relatively “low” vision of man has evoked the disdain of many thinkers, from Descartes to Fichte and Nietzsche, who have seen it as an ignoble and banal vision of human possibilities. It is difficult to deny this characterization. Yet the “banal” vision of man has constrained moral and political millennialism in undeniable and valuable ways. In eschewing the view from the heights, it has also avoided plunging into the abyss. The same cannot be said for the other strain of modern thought, whose representative figure is Descartes.

Descartes, too, was deeply influenced by the problem of the nominalist God, but his solution to this problem was different in decisive respects from that of empiricism. In particular, he has a radically different notion of man’s position with respect to both God and nature than Bacon and Hobbes. In his early thought, Descartes was convinced that he could construct an apodictic science on the basis of mathematics. Such a science, he believed, could represent all motion in thought so that human beings could truly master nature, ameliorating human misery, as Bacon had hoped, or producing the commodious life Hobbes desired, but actually making man the immortal lord of all creation (Descartes 1985, 1:143).¹² This initial project, spelled out in the unpublished *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, was called into question by Descartes’s realization that the idea of a truly omnipotent God undermined the certainty of mathematics. This realization led to the spiritual quest that ended with Descartes’ articulation of his famous principle, *cogito ergo sum*, as the foundation for all human knowledge.¹³ The scientific project as Descartes lays it out in his mature thought is thus a clear response to the problem posed by **nominalism**.

What distinguishes the Cartesian solution to this problem from that of Bacon and Hobbes is evident in Descartes's fundamental principle, which grounds all of modern science on an autonomous subject who not only transcends nature but is also able to resist and ultimately replace God. For Descartes, man becomes master and possessor of nature by taking it away from its current owner. This is possible because man already is God, or at least is the same infinite will that constitutes God (Descartes 1985, 2:40, 134; Descartes 1957–68, 2:628; 4:332; Wilson 1986, 350).

The Cartesian notion of science thus rests upon a new notion of man as a willing being, modeled on the omnipotent God of **nominalism**, and able like him to master nature through the exercise of his infinite will. Descartes draws here not merely upon **nominalism** but upon the humanist ideal of a self-creating and self-sufficient individuality that he found in Machiavelli and Montaigne, and upon the Counter-Reformation conjunction of the human and divine will that arose in response to the similar notion in Luther. It is this potent combination that gives rise to the notion of subjectivity that plays a central role in rationalism, idealism, and later Continental thought as well.

Insofar as Descartes both leaves man within nature as a body in motion and elevates him above it into a quasi-omnipotence, he lays the groundwork for an inevitable and irremediable dissatisfaction that poses tremendous moral and political dangers for modern man. The infinite human will constantly strives to master and transcend its embodiment but is itself at the same time always bodily. In striving to realize its infinite essence, it is always constrained to negate the finite. However idealistic and noble its aspirations, this strain of modern thought repeatedly produces a millennial politics of extreme discipline and dissatisfaction that is constantly frustrated in its ambitions and must always reach for ever-more-extreme means of control to achieve its ends.

* * *

In coming to terms with modernity, there has been a great temptation to identify modernity as a whole with one or another of the principal strains of modern thought, to deride it as petty and mundane because of the often-banal aspirations of empiricism and liberalism, or to reject it as a political nightmare because of the frequent fanaticism of its rationalism, idealism, and existentialism. Modernity, however, cannot be simply supported or rejected on either of these grounds, because it is not any one thing but a variety of traditions often quite at odds with one another. Each of these philosophical systems can be understood only in terms of the question it seeks to answer. Without the careful consideration of the profound theological questions that stand at the gateway to modernity and that continue to direct modernity's much more secular thinking in scarcely recognized ways, we will be unable to understand modernity or the lives we moderns have come to live and the politics in which we participate.

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Endnotes

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Note 1: It is particularly disappointing that many postmodernist thinkers who decry the demonization of the other and stress diversity and multiplicity have been so prone to define modernity monologically as subjectivity. [Back](#).

Note 2: In a technical sense, each of the things God chooses to bring into existence already has a nature. The natures of these things, however, are individual rather than universal. Moreover, they are infinite in number and chosen freely by divine will. They thus do not in any real sense constrain omnipotence, except insofar as they exclude the impossible, i.e. the logically contradictory. [Back](#).

Note 3: As severe as this position might seem, it actually ameliorates the Thomistic doctrine of original sin, since Ockham believes that no man intrinsically deserves damnation. [Back](#).

Note 4: For a discussion of the Renaissance vision of the state as an art work, see Funkenstein 1986, 342. [Back](#).

Note 5: It was already apparent to Heinz Heimsoeth (1994, 31) in 1922 that there was a clear connection between the early Renaissance and Ockham. This connection has become increasingly clear, especially in the history of science. See, for example, Koyré 1957; Crombie 1953; and of course Blumenberg 1983 and Funkenstein 1986. [Back](#).

Note 6: Luther insists here on the necessity of Scripture and rejects the extreme subjectivism of the evangelicals, who followed not the word of God but the illumination they received in direct communion with God, their so-called inner light. [Back](#).

Note 7: Stephen Toulmin (1990) has argued that modernity has two roots, one in the Renaissance and the other in the seventeenth century. [Back](#).

Note 8: Heimsoeth (1994, 47) has argued that in this sense Eckhart represents the first step toward the affirmation of creation. [Back](#).

Note 9: I do not mean to assert in this way that all early modern empiricists are atheists. I mean only to assert that in their interpretation of nature it is irrelevant whether God does or does not exist. [Back](#).

Note 10: Funkenstein (1986, 297) argues that this is the beginning of a new ideal of knowing as construction. [Back](#).

Note 11: The initial gulf between these two strains of thought is perhaps most immediately apparent in Hobbes's objections to Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and in Descartes's replies (Descartes 1985, 2:121–37). There is, of course, a growing interpenetration of these two strains of thought in later modernity. [Back](#).

Note 12: This project finds its preeminent form in the development of the calculus by Leibniz and Newton. [Back](#).

Note 13: I have developed this argument more fully in Gillespie 1995, 1–14, 28–63. [Back](#).

